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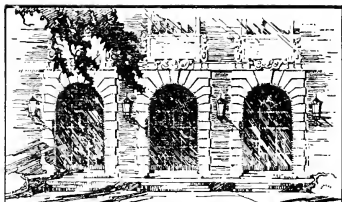
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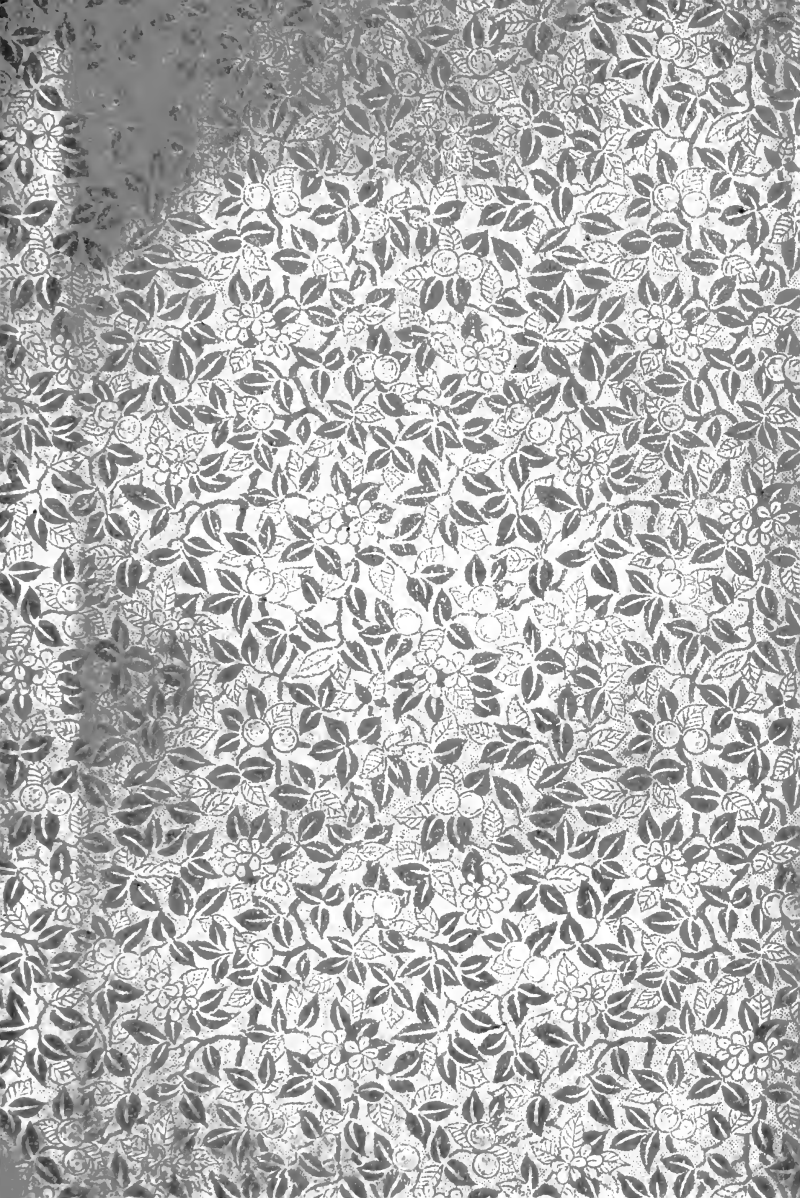
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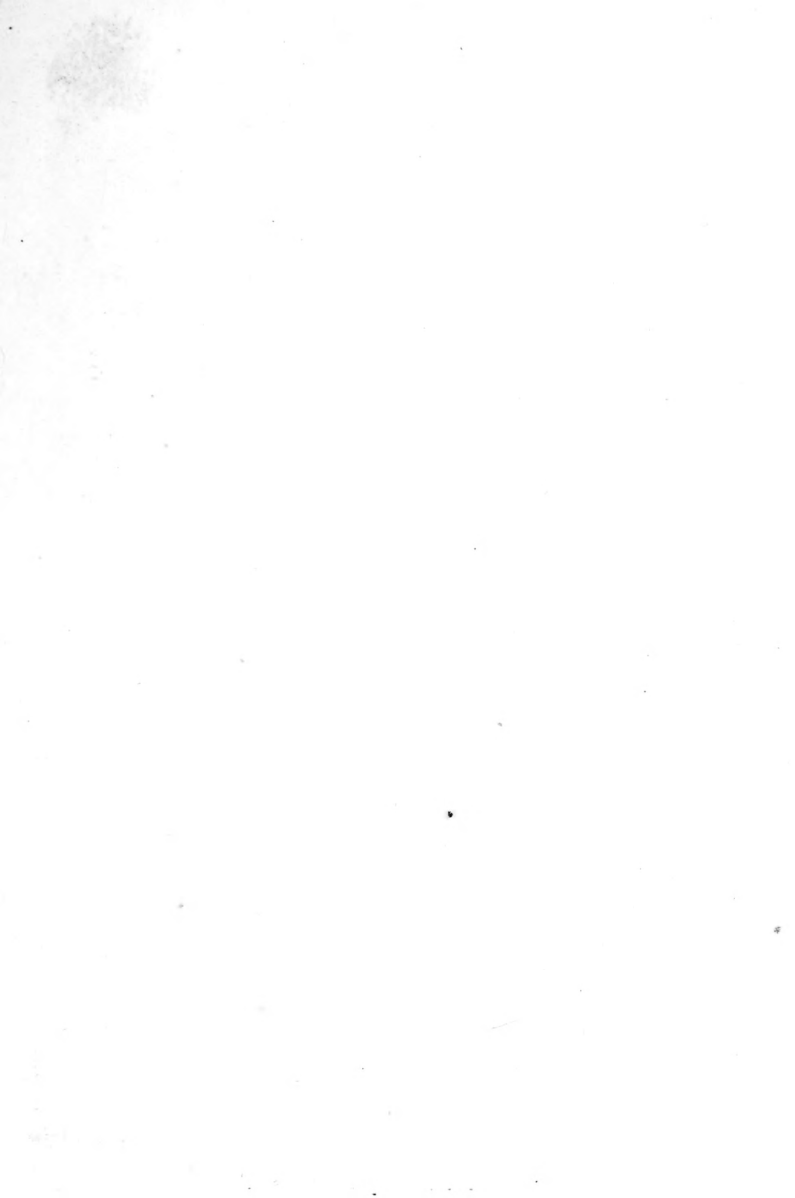
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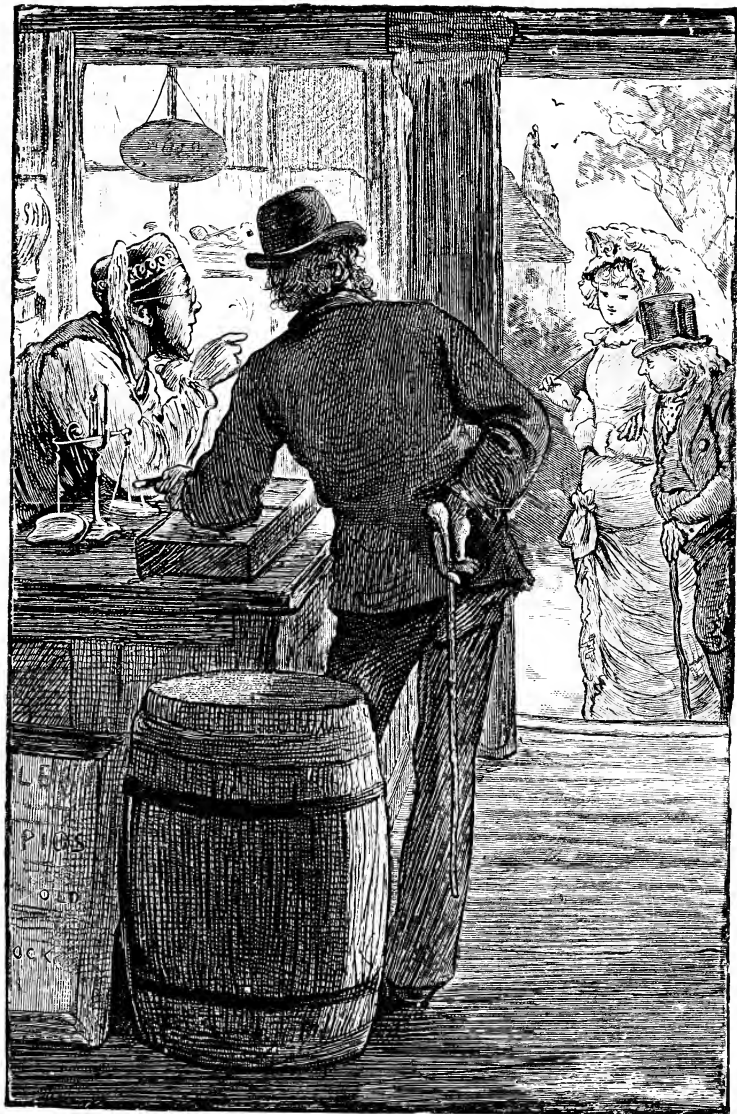
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'That's an old fellow, now.'

JOSEPH'S COAT

BY

DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'A LIFE'S ATONEMENT' ETC.



With TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS by FRED. BARNARD

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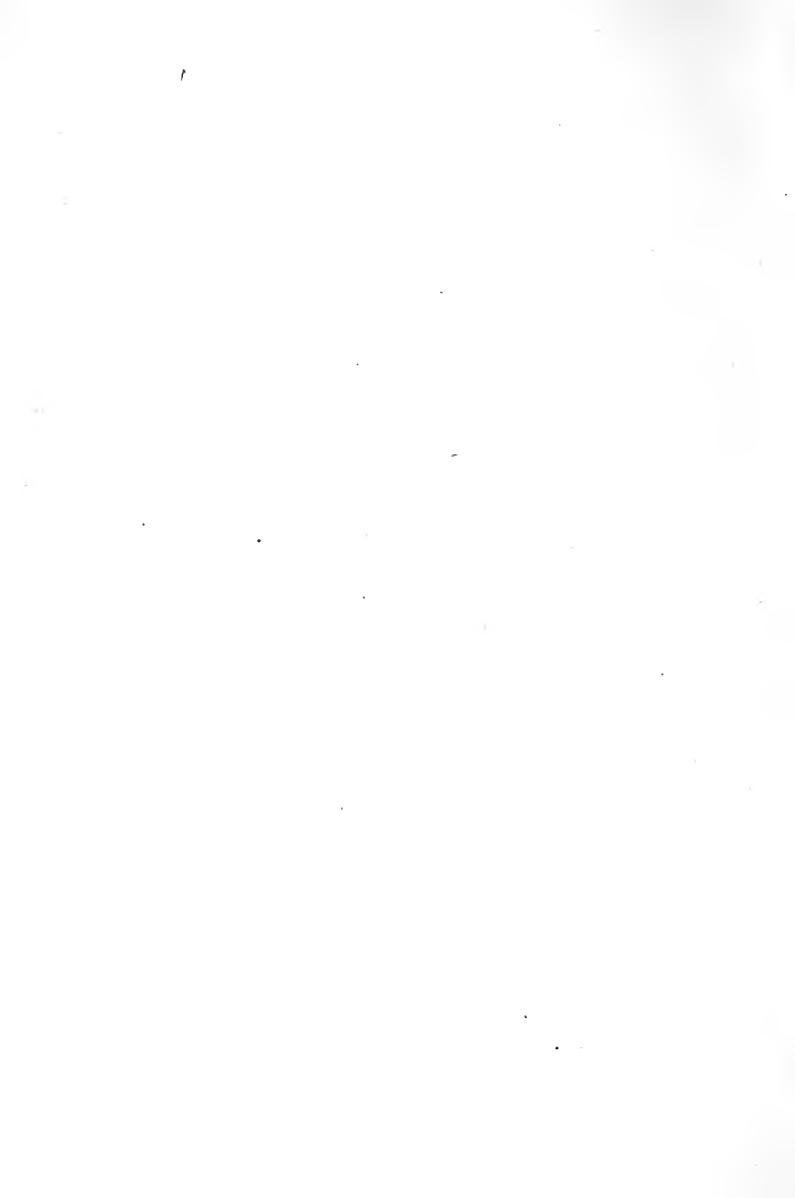
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JOSEPH'S COAT.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OLD GEORGE, propped up with pillows, sat in a big armchair in that room in which young George had once upon a time signed his own name without knowing it. His face was pallid and puffy, his lips had fallen to a vacuous looseness, and his eyes were dull and fish-like. His white hands wandered feebly about the rug which lay over his knees, and his whole look was that of a broken man. His housekeeper stood by him with jelly in a tea-cup, and fed him with a spoon until the old man turned his head away like a fretful baby.

‘Tek a bit more, master,’ said the housekeeper.

‘Is theer anythin’ wrong with it?’ asked

old George, moving his lips, with a doubtful air. 'I've been a good master to you, Mrs. Bullus, this many 'ears. I don't think you'd do me harm now.'

'Law bless you, master, how yo' do talk,' said Mrs. Bullus. 'Tek your vittles like a sensible old man, now. Do. Theer, that's right. Why, it's the very best o' cawves'-foot jelly, as I made myself.'

She smacked her lips with a relishing air, and old George again consented to be fed. The last spoonful had been just administered, when there came a knock at the front door, and the housekeeper, hastening to answer it, dropped a series of bobbing curtseys.

'Good morning,' said Sir Sydney Cheston, in tones subdued from those he commonly used. 'How is your master?'

'He's mendin', sir,' returned the housekeeper, still bobbing at the baronet, as though the sight of him set an uncontrollable spring in motion; 'but his poor yed's bad, an' he seems a bit childish-like.'

'Do you think he'd know me?' asked Sir

Sydney. 'Would it do him any harm to see me?'

'Oh, he seems to know folks just as well as ever, sir,' said the housekeeper; 'but please speak very quiet to him, sir. He's all o'er nerves, like.'

'Yes, I will,' answered Cheston, entering on tiptoe. 'This the room? Thank you.' He advanced gently towards the patient and sat down beside him. 'Well, Mr. Bushell, you're getting better, eh?' George looked at him vaguely. There was no speculation in the orbs that he did glare withal. 'You know me, don't you?'

'How d'ye do, sir?' said the patient, nodding at him feebly.

'You know *me*?' his visitor repeated, tapping himself on the waistcoat with a forefinger — 'Sir Sydney Cheston, you know, eh?'

The old man again nodded feebly, and chuckled with exceeding faintness.

'I've rode,' he answered, 'along of a baronet afore to-day.'

'So you have, Bushell,' said Cheston, 'so

you have.' He surveyed the old man with much discomfiture ; but whilst he did so George's eyes lit up a little, and he put out a shaking hand.

'I'm proud to see you here, Sir Sydney,' he quavered.

'That's well, that's well,' said Cheston, shaking hands with him. 'You're getting better, eh ? You'll be able to see to business again by-and-by, eh ?'

'In a day or two—in a day or two,' quavered old George ; but to his visitor's mind it looked unlikely. 'I'm proud to see you here,' the patient repeated, 'but I've allays been well thought on by the local nobility an' gentry, an' I'll tell you why. I've knowed my station, an' I've been a man as allays tried to do my dooty.'

'Yes, yes,' Cheston answered, with outward heartiness, and at this juncture the doctor arrived. After a brief examination of the patient he retired, taking Sir Sydney with him.

'What do you think of the case, doctor ?'

'Well, Sir Sydney, it's a case of considerable

difficulty. Sometimes I think he may recover mental soundness as well as bodily health, and sometimes I think he may not. We must leave all that to time.'

'You think he may recover bodily health?' asked Cheston.

'Yes,' said the other. 'He is in a fair way; but his mental strength returns slowly, and he has relapses.'

'Um,' said Cheston, standing beside the doctor's carriage. 'Look here! I've some very particular and important business with him.'

'Impossible to attend to it, Sir Sydney, I assure you, for weeks to come, at least.'

'Very well, then,' said Sir Sydney; 'I won't allude to it for weeks to come. I won't allude to it until you give me leave, but what I want to ask is this:—Will it facilitate matters if I call on him now and then, and let him get used to me before I broach what I have to say to him? Now I've given you my word that I won't hint at the thing until you give me leave.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir Sydney,' said the doctor, turning with a foot on the carriage step,

‘but has the business anything to do with that which gave him the first shock? Do you know?’

‘It is the same,’ replied Cheston; ‘but he doesn’t associate me with it. *Entre nous*, it’s a great deal more important than his getting better can be to anybody; but unluckily it can’t be done without his getting better.’

He left the doctor to think over that enigma, and went back to the hotel in Birmingham to join Joe Bushell and John Keen. His visit to old George had come about as the result of a consultation, and he had been fixed upon to spy out the condition of affairs for reasons plain enough. A return of the long-lost nephew might have killed the old rogue outright, and John Keen’s presence was but too likely to upset him again, whilst no suspicion could attach to a visit from the baronet. Cheston gave his news.

‘It’s no use starting on a wild-geese chase to Melbourne,’ said Joe. ‘We can see the old man’s hand too plainly now to think of that.’

‘Why?’ asked John Keen.

‘Don’t you see that my uncle’s object was to get the boy out of the way? Do you think he would be likely to tell the Governor of the gaol the real place to which he persuaded him to go?’

‘What shall you do?’ asked Cheston.

‘What can I do?’ returned Joe. ‘There is nothing to do but to wait.’

‘And where shall you wait?’ his friend demanded. ‘Come and stay with me.’

‘No,’ returned the exile; ‘I don’t want to be known. I’ll stay where I am at present, and lie close.’

The baronet pressed him, but he would not yield, and at last he confessed his purpose.

‘The fact is, I’m trying to make my mind up to go to Wrethedale and——.’ He broke down, and turned away; but recovering himself in a moment, he addressed John: ‘I suppose there’s an hotel there?’

‘Yes,’ said John.

‘We might make a casual acquaintance when I get there, Mr. Keen, if you don’t mind,’ said Joe; ‘but I should be glad if you wouldn’t know me just at first. I am surrounded by

difficulties. Let me know what to do before I act decisively. You will do your best for me here, I know, Cheston.'

'Rely on that,' his friend answered, with a firm shake-hands, and after a little further talk they parted. Sir Sydney was to watch old George, and to report on his fitness for approach when the time came. The report was to be made to the lawyer, and not to Joe, who was to figure in Wrethedale as an idle stranger until he could decide upon his own line of action, or events decided for him. Cheston went home, and in the evening the young lawyer and the returned wanderer took train together.

'Mr. Keen,' said Joe, as they sat alone in the railway carriage, 'on my own best showing you have no reason to think well of me, but I want you to be my friend. You see my wife sometimes?'

'Yes,' said John. 'I have known her all my life.'

'Did she strike you as a happy woman before this trouble came?' poor Joe asked.

'No,' said John. 'She always seemed to

me, even when I was a lad, a woman who had seen trouble. She never complained of anything, but there was always a sort of gentle sadness about her.'

Joe nodded sorrowfully and fell a-thinking.

Wherever this wanderer had gone men had somehow liked him and believed in him. His handsome face, the saddened good-fellowship of his look, his ways, genial and gentle, had enlisted the hearts of men and of women. John felt tempted to like him, but had reason for not yielding him friendship on a sudden. Yet it was indisputable that the sternness with which he had thought of Joe from the time at which he had first heard of him had vanished. He blamed, but he pitied as much as he blamed. He felt impelled to a liking which might be larger than his pity. It had seemed natural to picture the lost husband as an altogether empty and self-satisfied creature, who, having gratified the freak of a month, was willing to go away and let a woman suffer for his sake for a lifetime; but it was not easy to believe in that picture in the presence of the original it libelled.

The two reached Wrethedale, and by mutual consent parted like strangers on the platform. Joe had packed but a small portmanteau for the journey, and, taking this in hand, he walked into the main street of the old-fashioned town, and cast about for a place to stay in. In a little time he chanced upon an inn, and entering, demanded supper and a bed. He sent the meal away almost untasted, and rambled about the streets, looking up at the lights in the houses, and wondering whether Dinah lived in this house or in that. He roamed till bedtime through the quiet ways of the town, scarcely meeting a human creature. When he slept it was to dream all night of things that had happened years ago, and in his dreams at least the time from his leaving England until his return was blotted out, and he was young again.

After breakfast next morning he rambled out with a cigar in his mouth, and was conscious of the fact that he created a sensation in the rear of many curtained windows. There were not many people in the street, but as he sauntered slowly on he was aware of an old,

old man, with spindle legs and a rotund waist-coat, who pottered along the cobbled footway, supported on one side by a handsome young woman, and on the other by a walking-stick. The old fellow looked up at stalwart Joe as he went by, and the idle stranger made a guess at his identity. Feigning to check himself in his walk as if he had just remembered something, Joe turned back and passed the pair with a lively step, without looking at either of them. In a hundred yards he came to a tobacconist's shop, and entered. Whilst he stood there fingering and pricing unsmokeable cigars, rightly called 'weeds' by the Wrethedale youth who bought them, he kept an eye upon the street, and when the old man and the handsome girl went by, he said to the shopman:—

‘That’s an old fellow, now.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the shopman.

‘Your oldest inhabitant, I should say,’ continued Joe, fishing with simple cunning.

‘No, sir,’ returned the man. ‘Not as there’s many older folks in the town neither. But the old gentleman’s a new resident here, sir.’

‘Indeed,’ said Joe ; and not seeing his way to any further questioning, he bought half-a-dozen of the unsmokeables, and went out with a polite ‘Good-morning.’

Youth and age were thirty or forty yards away when Joe, who had prolonged his business as much as possible, emerged from the tobacconist’s shop. He followed slowly, lingering to stare in at shop windows, where there was nothing in particular to attract his gaze, and pausing sometimes to look at the front of an old house covered with timber, and hanging somewhat over the street. By these devices he accommodated his pace to that of the pair in front, and every now and then he sent a glance in their direction. All these years had made such changes that he could not be quite certain, but he thought he recognised old Daniel. But who was the handsome girl, and what could have brought old Daniel into association with one who looked so far removed from him? Joe was almost sure of Daniel, and the more he watched him, the more clearly he seemed to see the old gait and the old figure, altered as

they were. The town High Street is not very long, and slowly as they went they soon came to the end of the shops, and reached a little range of semi-detached villas. At the gate of one of these paused the pair whose steps Joe was watching, and the girl gently helped the old fellow to mount to the gravelled pathway. Saunter as slowly as he could, they were only half-way up this pathway when Joe came level with them. The door of the house opened, and a voice spoke.

‘Well, father, how do you feel after your walk?’

‘I’m a bit fagged, Diner,’ piped Daniel in his hoarse and shaky treble.

Joe looked and knew her, and sauntered by, with a head suddenly averted. There had been no need of the spoken name. There had been scarcely need for a sight of the face. The voice he remembered so well sounded unchanged in his ears. She looked her age—his passing glance, swiftly taken as it was, had told him that—and yet how little altered by the years she seemed! As she had spoken to

her father she had smiled, and Joe thought he might have seen the smile for the last time yesterday, it seemed so much the same.

As he walked away with his head a little drooping, all the past unrolled itself before him like a panorama. He had resigned himself years ago to believe that his father and mother were dead, and at rest from the trouble he had caused them, and he knew now, and had known always, that when their grey hairs reached the grave, he had hurried their going. He had never been hard-hearted, never the man to sin with impunity, and his folly and wickedness had been with him always, though never so heavily as now. There was no extenuation for himself in his own mind, no blame for anybody but Joe Bushell.

He knew nothing of the topography of the place, of course, but he struck into the fields on the right-hand side of the road, and making a long *détour* reached the far end of the town in a walk of three or four hours. It did not seem easy to pass the house again, and when he had reached the inn he was tied to his

chamber until twilight fell. But then the longing of his heart drove him to the semi-detached villa, and he walked up and down in the dark before the gate, and heard a voice singing in the front room where a lamp was lighted. Where he stood he could hear the words quite clearly. 'Entreat me not to leave thee, nor to return from following after thee.' The musical setting was not such as would satisfy a student of the modern school, but it did the immortal words no wrong in the listener's ears, and the voice that sang was sweet and true. A great artist might do the words more wrong than this simple liquid voice could do them. The voice was not that of Joe's wife as he knew, but it came from the house she lived in, and it seemed to his heart to breathe her longing and faithfulness. He pushed open the gate, and, like Arden in Tennyson's story, he crept up the pathway and peeped through the window, at a little crevice of light between the casement and the blind. There he saw at the piano the girl who had given her arm to Daniel in the street that morning, and in a corner of the room

Daniel himself looking frail, very old, and remarkably uninterested. Dinah sat behind the lamp, and the watcher could make out nothing of her until she arose and moved to the piano, where she laid a hand upon the musician's shoulder and spoke to her. Then Joe had a complete view of her face and looked his fill at it, till a step in the roadway startled him and he crouched lower, trusting to be unseen. As it happened, however, the owner of the footstep paused before the low wall, vaulted it noiselessly, dropping on the grass, and, advancing swiftly on tiptoe, touched Joe on the shoulder as he rose to meet the new-comer.

‘I guessed it might be you,’ said John Keen in a whisper, ‘but I was not sure, and I was bound to see.’

Joe nodded and went on tiptoe down the gravelled pathway. John followed, and when they reached the road the younger man took the other's arm; they walked together for some distance without speaking, with their backs turned to the town.

‘How did you find out the house?’ John asked in a low tone. Something which he was

not careful to analyse made him speak softly, as one does by instinct in a church.

‘I saw old Daniel go in this morning,’ answered Joe, and again they walked in silence for a time. ‘Mr. Keen,’ said Joe after that pause, ‘I shall go back in the morning, and see Cheston. Advise me in the meantime. Can we do anything?’

‘I have been thinking,’ John returned. ‘There is a friend of mine in Melbourne who was at school with me and with your son. He knows nothing of what has happened, and I might wire to him to see if he could tell us anything of George.’

‘Do anything that suggests itself,’ said Joe, hopelessly. ‘There need be no care about money in the matter. By the way’—he felt it absurd to affect to speak in that casual fashion, and yet he could not help it—‘are they well-to-do?’ giving his head a backward nod.

‘Your wife and her father?’ John asked him.

‘Yes.’

‘Daniel Banks is almost wealthy.’

‘I was thinking,’ Joe explained, ‘that she

might find money useful if we could have found a way to give it her.'

'She does not want for money,' answered John, speaking brusquely.

'Well,' Joe resumed, 'I shall go back to-morrow. If there is anything to say write to Cheston. He will let me know. There's nothing uncommon in my name, but if anybody heard it and associated it with me down there, it would be troublesome.'

'Mr. Bushell,' said John, stopping short in the dark road, and speaking like one who chooses his words carefully: 'I have no right to interfere in your affairs. When I first heard of your marriage and your disappearance I thought ill of you, but since I met you I have changed my opinions—partly. I say again, I have no right to interfere in your affairs: and still I do so. You can stop me by a word.' He paused, but Joe said nothing. 'I have persuaded myself that your chief anxiety now is to do everything that can be done to rectify the wrongs you once did unthinkingly, or carelessly, and in the folly of youth.'

‘Not unthinkingly nor carelessly,’ said Joe to himself, though not a word escaped his lips; ‘but with my eyes open, and knowing that I was a villain all along.’

‘If I am right in thinking as I do,’ said John, after waiting vainly for an answer, ‘I have one question to put to you.’ He paused again.

‘Go on.’

‘If it could be shown to you that in the circumstances of the case it is your clear duty to acknowledge yourself to your wife, and to associate yourself with her in the endeavour to recover your own, would you do it?’

‘I have only one duty left,’ said Joe.

‘And that is ——?’

‘To do the best thing for her happiness. Understand me. To go back to her would be a pain and a humiliation. But I am not afraid of the pain and humiliation. I am afraid of adding to the unhappiness she has already suffered. I have been dead in her fancy for many years past, and whatever grief I cost her is done with long ago. If she finds that after all I have been alive and have still kept away——

why should I revive a trouble which has been dead this twenty years?’

‘I have known your wife,’ said John, ‘ever since I was a little fellow eight or nine years old, when George and I first went to school together. I know how blameless and gentle a life she has lived, and I know partly how unhappy she has been. And if I am not a greater ass than ever lived before, she is as truly attached to you still as she was when you went away.’

‘To my memory. Not to me,’ Joe answered with a heaving breast. ‘I was two-and-twenty then; I am over eight-and-forty now. I’m not the man she loved. I’m not the man she knew.’

‘Mr. Bushell,’ said the young lawyer, clearing his voice of a slight huskiness before he spoke, ‘if I had not been forced (against my will) to believe you after all a man with a good heart, a man who desires to make reparation for a wrong of such old standing, I would as soon bite my tongue off as speak one word to bring you two together. I don’t remember my mother, sir, and I never had a sister of my own,

and your wife, in a way, took the place they might have filled in my fancy when I was a lad, and there are not many people in the world whose welfare is so dear to me. I believe you are an honest fellow, sir, in spite of what happened so many years since, and if you can find it in your heart to be good to her in the future, and to spend your life, as you ought to spend it, in consoling her for all that she has undergone and suffered, I know you ought to do it. I am a young man, Mr. Bushell, and under other circumstances I hope I should speak with less confidence and more reserve. Perhaps it might seem to fit my age and yours better if I held my tongue altogether; but I am fond of your wife, sir, and I respect her as highly as anybody in the world, and that is all the excuse I have to offer.'

'You need offer no excuse,' Joe replied huskily. 'You have not said a word that I can find fault with. You have spoken as a man ought to speak.'

'I have some knowledge,' John resumed, with a new hesitation in his tone at first, 'of the young lady to whom your wife first gave her

confidence. I know enough of her to be sure that if the secret of your presence in this country were entrusted to her it would be kept, sacredly, and as a trust of honour. With that knowledge in her power she could be relied upon—I am sure of it—to approach your wife and ascertain her feeling, and I could rely upon her to conduct the matter with so much tact that no suspicion would be excited.’

John’s admiration of Ethel and his belief in her had no bounds which it is worth while here to attempt to discover, but the returned exile could hardly be expected to share his faith in her. He said nothing, but even through the darkness John felt his distrust and hurried on.

‘You will not forget your own contention, Mr. Bushell, that for many years your wife has had good reason to believe you dead. It will not be easy except on direct evidence to persuade her that you are still alive. It cannot be easy for her to suspect the truth if the talk concerning you is led by a woman she loves, and is led naturally and without haste.’

‘Give me time to think,’ said Joe.

‘I will ask you one more question, Mr.

Bushell,' John continued. 'Are you convinced in your own mind that if your presence would be hailed by her, as I believe it would be, as a help and a solace, that you could surrender yourself to *be* a help and solace to her. If you are uncertain of yourself in that respect, I will not press you by another word.'

'Mr. Keen,' Joe answered with a broken voice, 'if I could undo the wrong I did I would lay down my life, though that is saying little. If I could lighten the burden she has to bear by but ever so little I would make any sacrifice that might be offered me. I don't speak unthinkingly or melodramatically in saying so ; I mean it from my soul. But I will lay no new burden on her. How could I after all that she has suffered?'

'If she were glad to take you back again,' John pressed him still. 'If you knew that it would lighten the weight she has to bear to have you back? It is no light thing in itself to sink to an unloved and lonely age. Even if George were found and provided for and sent away, do you think she would be happy, and in no need of comfort? Is she in no need of comfort now?'

‘What comfort is it in my power to bring her? A runaway nearly six-and-twenty years back, never since heard of. No, no, no. You tempt me to act on my own selfish longings, not to heal her wounds, poor thing.’

His voice was but half audible, and regrets and longings, and new-born hopes that hardly dared to hope, and fears that slew them as they lifted their weak heads, made a strange tumult in his heart.

There was no make-believe in the husky voice. True men are quick to read such things, and John knew the sincerity of every word the other spoke. There was little passion in the phrases used, but the man was true and meant it all, and more. And this conviction could only spur the younger. It is something to an ingenuous youngster, whom the world has not yet chilled, to think that he can bring two sore hearts to peace and healing.

‘Will you let me try to help you, Mr. Bushell?’ he pleaded.

‘Not in the way you propose,’ said Joe, lifting his head in the darkness. ‘There is too much danger to her peace in it.’

‘In any other way?’ John pressed him.

‘In any way that helps her,’ Joe responded, ‘but in no way that endangers her peace of mind. I trust you, Mr. Keen. I am compelled to trust you, but I could do it willingly without that. I have confidence in you.’

‘You shall not find it misplaced,’ said John.

‘I am sure of it,’ replied Joe. ‘In the meantime I dare stay here no longer. Wire to Melbourne and let me know the result of your inquiries. Place at the cable office at this end whatever sum may be needed for a full reply. I will go back with you now and lay money in your hands for that purpose. Wherever it is necessary to spend money in this inquiry, spend it without fear. For my own part I can do nothing better than to go back and watch for my uncle George’s recovery.’

The lawyer saw that it was useless just then to press him further. Joe laid plenteous funds at his disposal, and next day he disappeared from Wrethedale as he had arrived—a figure for a minute’s gossip, but beyond that unnoticed and unknown.

CHAPTER XXVII.

So Dinah's longing heart went on unsatisfied in the old way, and was fed by little food of earthly hope or comfort. She had never resigned herself to forget Joe, but he was dead or beyond all earthly chance of meeting any more, and there were no new sorrows possible on that count. So far Joe was right. Had her son been what he should have been, Dinah, in spite of the great trouble of her youth, would have been a fairly happy woman. The deepest wounds heal at last if they do not kill before the healing process can begin.

Now I am not the first historian by many who has found himself involved in chronological difficulties, and like others I can only rely upon my reader's patience and discernment. When I had had young George eight or nine weeks in England, and had at last left him face to face

with Ethel, I was compelled to go back to the hour of his arrival to show what his father had been doing in the meantime.

The two, meeting in this way, stood rooted each before the other. A cur, so caught, would have had the manliness to put his tail between his legs and run, but the tramp was incapable of even so much resolution as would command a flight. In the girl's mind fear and amazement, and hate and wrath, and pity, made a jumble of all thought, and left her also helpless. She had of course believed him still under lock and key, but, though she could scarce believe their evidence, her eyes told her he was here. And being here, what could have brought him but one thing?—and that one thing the desire to make an appeal to Dinah. Perhaps he had made an escape from prison. That indeed seemed the only solution of the mystery of his presence there, and, if it were so, he was proscribed and hunted.

As was natural, the noble nature recovered from the shock of this encounter whilst the abject one was yet stunned.

‘How do you come here?’ she asked; ‘have you escaped?’

His knees shook and he stared at her, until he hung his head before her glance and began to weep again.

‘Have you escaped?’ she repeated, breathlessly.

‘No,’ the wretched creature answered. ‘I was released. But I can get nothing to do, and I am starving.’

She sent her hand hastily to the pocket of her dress and found her purse there. Glancing into it she saw two or three pieces of gold and a little heap of silver. His face seemed to have a dreadful fascination for her and to draw her towards him. She advanced little by little with the purse in her outstretched hand.

‘Here,’ she said, and dropping it into the hand he held out to receive it she recoiled, looking at him still with her hazel eyes widened to a glance of horror.

‘I don’t deserve it,’ the tramp moaned and snuffled unmanlike through his tears. ‘I don’t deserve it.’

‘Why are you here?’ she asked. The sight of him was a terror and a horror to her, but what could she do? ‘You shall not show yourself to Dinah whilst you look like that. You would kill her!’

This hit him like a blow and stopped his tears for a second or two. He stole a glance at her and dropped his eyes shiftily.

‘Is *she* here?’ he found courage to ask.

‘Go,’ she answered him, ‘and write to me at the Post Office so that I can get the letter in the morning. Tell me where you are that I can send an answer. But don’t stay in the town.’

‘What is the name of the town?’ he made shift to ask.

She told him and repeated her bidding.

‘Go. Buy some clothes, and write to me to-night.’

With that she turned from him and fairly ran down hill towards the town, but nearing the houses she dropped her veil and composed her gait. When she reached her own room she locked herself in and struggled in silence through an attack of hysteria, and then de-

scended, pale, and with a glittering light in her eyes.

‘Why, our Ethel,’ cried her mother, ‘what’s happened to you? You look as if you’d seen a ghost.’

Ethel tried to laugh at this, with such ill success that in spite of resolution hysteria began again.

‘What happened to you?’ the mother cried anew, when after a minute or so Ethel had recovered herself.

Ethel’s conscience would not tolerate a lie, but she could not tell the whole truth.

‘I was frightened,’ she said, ‘and I ran.’

‘You frightened?’ cried her mother. The good woman had never heard of such a thing before, for Ethel was not of the female tribe who squeal at spiders, and experience in the presence of a mouse such terrors as might once have seized the people of Herculaneum. ‘What frightened you?’

‘I met a tramp,’ said Ethel faintly.

‘Why, was he rude to you?’ cried the old woman.

‘No,’ answered Ethel, unable to tell all. ‘It was a lonely place and he begged, that was all.’

‘You mustn’t take them ramblin’ walks abroad, my love,’ said her mother solicitously. ‘It ain’t fit for maids to go about alone. You should ha’ somebody with you.’

All the evening long she harped upon the theme, and would scarce release Ethel from the house in the morning until she received assurance that nothing more was meant than a walk along the High Street.

The girl approached the Post Office with some inward reluctance. It would not be nice for anybody to think that she received letters there without her mother’s knowledge—even that the postmaster should think it was anything but pleasant to her. And there by ill-fortune was young lawyer Keen talking with the official when Ethel entered. It was more and more awkward to ask for the letter in his presence, but, giving him a cold little bow, she passed to the counter.

‘Have you a letter for me, addressed here?’

‘Yes, Miss.’

The postmaster produced it. John saw that it was addressed in a male handwriting, and thought no more about it for the time. Ethel with another cold little bow responded to his renewed salute, and went home with her letter. When she came to read it she discovered that the writer had wept all over it, and it was so splashed and blotched as to be decipherable only after difficulty. In some matters heart is taste. The hapless young man began this letter—‘My lost love, lost for ever!’—with a note of admiration scored in after the final letter, as if he had been writing for the printers. A shiver of disgust ran through the girl’s frame as she read this exordium. The writer went on to say (as in the letter addressed to John Keen) that he offered no excuses, feeling conscious that he had none to offer—adding that he knew he was unworthy of her—at which the reader crawled afresh—but that his sins had entailed a terrible punishment. He threw in one or two phrases of Scripture—‘I have sinned before heaven

and against thee,' and 'My punishment is greater than I can bear'—and he wound up by saying that he had re-attired himself, was staying at Borton at the sign of the Hare and Hounds, in Wedge Street, and remained for ever her miserable and unworthy George. Then came a postscript, in which he stated that he had expended almost all the money she had so generously given him, and expressed in fitting terms that form of gratitude which has been defined as a sense of favours to come.

As for love's idol, that was long since broken, and the worshipper was still sorely wounded by the shards. But in women's hearts sometimes, in spite of any and all wrong-doing on the part of the idol's original, there lingers a tenderness for what he was or seemed to be in the days when the poor image was first modelled, and gilded with the gold of the devotee's own nature. And in spite of Ethel's hatred and contempt there had lingered until now a certain starved and hungry sentiment (which would have been

faith if it could) in favour of a lost George whom she had known to be manly and honest, and indeed filled with all noble qualities, only a little while ago. But whatever tendrils of the heart sought to reach and touch the past, the brutal egotism and vile unconscious insolence of this epistle blighted them for ever.

She folded up the sheet of blotted and tear-soiled paper, put it in its envelope, walked into the garden, passed through the wicket gate into Dinah's small territory, and so into the house. She had not slept all night, but her eyes shone with an unusual brilliance and her cheeks were flushed with clear colour. Dinah, who was in the back kitchen, superintending her little west-country maid, kissed Ethel in a preoccupied way, and noticed nothing unusual in her aspect for a minute. But by-and-by, attracted by her silence, she turned, and saw at a glance that the girl's whole nature was in some way strongly stirred.

'Come into the sittin' room, my dear,' she said gently, and moved away, Ethel following.

Daniel sat in the front kitchen with his

feet on the steel fender, and patted the girl's hand in answer to the passing kiss she gave him. The kiss was warmer and tenderer than usual, for they were all knit together by the same sorrow, she thought.

'Dinah,' said Ethel, 'I have brought you news which you will be relieved to hear.' Dinah began to tremble, and the girl put her arms about her. 'They are not going to keep your son in prison all the time they said.'

Dinah stood free of her embraces, looking at her.

'If it would be any comfort to you, you can see him.'

'Where?' said Dinah, 'where? When are they going to let him free again?'

'Can you bear to be told, dear?' asked Ethel. 'They have let him out already.'

Dinah clasped her hands and slipped into a seat, though but for Ethel's arms guiding her she would have fallen to the floor. She arose with shaking knees and trembling hands.

'Where is he? Let me go to him. Let me see him. Where is he?'

‘You can see him to-day, dear, if you will. He is at Borton, at the Hare and Hounds, in Wedge Street.’

‘Ethel, my dear,’ said Dinah, ‘I must go and see him. He *is* my child for all he’s been so wicked. I must go and see him.’

‘Yes, darling, yes,’ Ethel answered. ‘You must go. You will go to-day?’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ declared Dinah, with trembling eagerness. She seemed to think that some apology was due to Ethel, for she clung to her and repeated that he was her child—he was her child after all. And, to tell the truth, the poor thing’s soul was rent between her horror of her child and the blind yet holy instinct of motherhood which drew her to him in spite of his wickedness. She shared to the full all Ethel’s loathing of the crimes—they had steeled even her heart against him for an hour—but she remembered all her own maternal pangs and fears, and his father’s far-off kisses and embraces; sacred—sacred enough to sanctify even him. And so the mother’s instinct drew her to his side, willing to share his shame and bear his burthen.

She was so agitated—as was natural—that she was compelled to leave to Ethel all arrangements for the journey, which, though brief enough, could scarcely be performed impromptu. There was money to be got for the prodigal, and this was only to be obtained from Daniel, whose natural tight-fistedness increased with age. Ethel explained that Dinah was going to Borton and wanted money.

‘Her’s allays agooin’ to Borton,’ moaned Daniel, ‘an’ her’s allays a wantin’ money.’

But he surrendered his keys to Ethel after his customary grumble and sent her upstairs for his cash-box, having first removed with infinite fumbling the particular key which opened it.

‘That’ll be enough for her,’ said Daniel, producing a half-sovereign.

‘Not at all,’ said Ethel disdainfully. Patience with small vices was not her pet virtue.

‘What’s her want it for?’ piped Daniel in obstinate remonstrance. ‘I baint agooin’ to ha’ my money throwed about wasteful. No, no.’

‘Mr. Banks,’ said Ethel decisively, ‘you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Dinah

never asks you for a penny unless she really wants it.'

'Well, what's her want, an' what's her want it for?' he asked.

'She wants five pounds,' said Ethel.

'Eh?' cried the old fellow in dismay. 'Five pound? Her'd like me to die i' the workus, I believe!'

'Never mind, Mr. Banks.' said Ethel; 'I can borrow the money from my mother, I dare say.'

'Rubbidge!' said Daniel. 'My gell's beholden to nobody.'

And with long-drawn reluctance he produced a five pound note, and having smoothed it with affectionate fingers, and rustled it near his ear with finger and thumb, and held it half-a-dozen times against the light to admire the water-mark, he surrendered it. There was nobody in the world but Ethel who would have succeeded on such terms with him, but he was in some dread of her as being 'a cut over' his own kind of folks, and he was more obedient to her than to

anybody else. He was going downwards fast into that second childhood which is robbed of all the graces of the first, and owns nothing endearing but its helplessness, and the memory of what its manhood was, perhaps.

Then there was the time-table to be consulted, and, since Dinah was going, Daniel's dinner must be arranged for next door. These and other little duties of a like sort Ethel took upon herself, and although there is nothing *per se* heroic in getting a five-pound note out of the fingers of a miserly old man, or in making arrangements for the old man's dinner, there have been achievements chronicled in very glowing language which have deserved less praise than these simple doings merited under the circumstances. For the girl's heart was burning all the time, and every wound her base lover had given her was throbbing with new agony. She gave no sign, and that is woman's heroism.

When Dinah reached the market town she found Wedge Street opening off the market-place, which was alive with stalls and rustic

dealers, a street very broad at its upper end and very narrow at its lower, where it closed in with the Hare and Hounds, which seemed to have been drawn up across it to block the thoroughfare. As fate willed it, she had no need to make inquiries after her son, for just as she crossed the threshold he appeared in the passage, and they saw each other.

‘Come with me.’ she said, tremblingly.
‘We can’t talk here.’

They walked up the street and along one side of the market square, into the town High Street, and on for half a mile until there were fields on either side, and there was no one near. Then they turned into a narrow little lane, and there the mother threw her arms about the criminal’s neck and lifted up her voice and wept. I will not say that the tears that filled his eyes were altogether base and unworthy at that moment. Some touch of ruth was on him after all, and he felt ashamed of himself. As Dinah hugged him close to her breast and clung to him, the old barriers which had so long held back the words gave way.

‘My child, my George, my son—my own child!’

The wretched George standing there like a lay figure to be hugged, and not having in him, as yet, the immeasurable insolence to pretend any love to Dinah in return, was smitten by these words as by a hammer. And, of course, the one interpretation he put on them was that Dinah’s mind had somehow become unsettled, and that she was not answerable for what she was saying. That one idea which had been in her mind from the hour when first she had heard of her boy’s arrest was uppermost now.

‘You were wicked, George,’ she sobbed as she kissed him, and he braced himself to receive her reproaches with propriety; ‘but it was all my wicked fault as you was tempted. If I’d ha’ been brave an’ good, an’ let you had your rights, you’d ha’ been a good lad, I know you would—I know you would, my dear.’

It was evident to George’s mind that Dinah was very mad indeed. Her words meant nothing to him.

‘And oh!’ cried Dinah in an agony of

tears and caresses, 'I never told you as I *was* your mother, and of course you never grewed up to love me like a child would ha' done.'

Really it was getting time for sanity to interfere. The shock of these extraordinary notions had for the moment driven George's humilities out of him. He struggled from her embraces, though she clung to him hard, and standing at arm's length he spoke :

'Dinah, what are you talking about? Are you mad?'

'No, darlin', no,' she answered. 'Oh, George, forgive me. I've been a wicked woman.'

In the pain of her self-accusation she threw herself upon her knees before him, and in that attitude she told her story. It sounded incredible at first, and he held for a minute or two his first opinion—that Dinah had gone mad. But as she went on with the tale, and came to her interview with old George, and his refusal to believe her, and as the listener's mind grasped the fact that if the tale were true his mother owned a full half of George Bushell's fortune,

such a light poured over everything old George had said and done and seemed that doubt was impossible. Under that sudden beam of light old George's one intelligible motive stood revealed, and a truth which needed no bolstering was corroborated a half-minute later by the few and hurried words in which the agonised mother told of the theft of the certificate. The whole tale was told so swiftly, and was so broken by the narrator's sobs, and so tangled by the listener's sideways guesses here and there, that half the details miscarried on their way to his intelligence, but the main truth of it stood like a pyramid, dominant and unshakable. He saw it and his head whirled, and he gasped at it. The felon of little more than half a year ago, the penniless and starving tramp of yesterday, was the rightful heir to a quarter of a million of money! He had known—everybody had known—how much old Joe Bushell had been worth when he died. Dinah knelt at his feet, clinging to his knees and pleading with him, and he never heard her.

‘ Say you forgive me, dear ; say you forgive

me! Oh, I have been a wicked, wicked woman ; but only say you forgive me, darlin'! Say you forgive me !'

He did not answer by a word. A quarter of a million of money, and he the rightful heir to it! That amazing vision shut everything else from sight. The pleading mother struggled from her knees and clasped him once more to her bosom.

'Say you forgive me, darlin'! Say you forgive me!'

'Yes, yes,' he answered, with his old fretful impatience. The news had shaken him into himself again. He began to see that in place of being a sinner he had all this time been sinned against most deeply. Swindled! Juggled into penitence and tears by the man who strove to rob him of so vast a sum! His wrath rose above even his amazement.

'I can't expect you to love me all at once,' his mother pleaded. 'I can't expect it when I've been so wicked, but you will love me a bit, my darlin', won't you? when you've had time. Won't you? Won't you?'

‘Yes, yes,’ he said again impatiently, scarcely knowing what he answered to.

‘You shall have your rights, George,’ said unhappy Dinah, fawning on him heart-brokenly. She had no blame for him that he did not answer her caresses and her words of endearment. It was her fault that he had been robbed—not of a fortune merely, but of a mother. How could she hope that he would love her all at once? ‘I’ve got my lines now, darlin’,’ she wept to him. ‘I’ve brought ’em with me to show you, so as you shouldn’t misbelieve me.’ She drew the paper from her bosom, and he looked at it, mechanically at first, but then with understanding.

Every pulse in his body and every current of his little soul turned one way, and for once in his life he threw off every tatter of pretence and humbug, and spoke the truth as he saw it.

‘My God, Dinah!’ he cried aloud, ‘you HAVE been a fool, to be sure!’

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was true enough to Dinah's ears and heart, and only failed of truth in not being harsh enough. Yes, he had a right to reproach her. If she had not been wicked he would never have been tempted, and she saddled herself with the weight of his misdoings.

As for George, he had been surprised into candour, and he had time to be sorry for it before either of them spoke again. It would be very foolish to kill the fowl of the golden eggs before a single golden egg was laid. And apart from that, he was a criminal himself, and knew that it was proper for him to be lowly in demeanour. If you will look at it, the young man's position was embarrassing. Dinah could scarcely expect to have the truth thrown at her in this rough and ready way, and yet she could scarcely expect that George would throw him-

self at once into her arms, and accept her proclamation of relationship with filial rapture.

I suppose I have told enough of this young man's story to establish pretty clearly the fact that he was—in King Solomon's sense at least—a fool. But he was clear-headed enough to comprehend the situation by a single motion of the mind, a motion swift and complex. Intellect and wisdom are no synonyms, and the lad had brains enough. He held good cards. How many tricks could he carry?

Dinah was crying passionately at his righteous rebuke, and was struggling passionately to repress her tears. George took time to think.

‘I didn't know, my darlin',’ she sobbed at last. ‘It was my ignorance as did it. I wouldn't ha' robbed you of a farthin' o' your rights, no, not to be Queen of England, if I'd only known.’

‘I beg your pardon for having spoken so,’ said George in answer. So keen a young man could not fail to see that as long as Dinah lived she must hold the purse-strings.

‘I’ve brought a bit o’ money with me now, dear,’ said the tearful mother; ‘as much as I could get father to let me have. But you’ll be able to do on it for a bit, an’ I must get you some more.’

She drew out her little purse and emptied it, and the young man accepted the gift with as good a grace as he could summon. It would not do to show too much impatience at first, though the idea of offering the rightful heir to a quarter of a million an advance so miserably inadequate was preposterous enough to have made any man angry. He said ‘Thank you,’ and stood with the money in one hand and his mother’s certificate of marriage in the other. A little sense of shamefacedness touched him. The action of pocketing the gift bade fair to interfere with his martyrdom.

As he stood thus looking downward, a little sick from late privation, later excess, and the emotion of the last hour, his eyes fell upon the written words ‘Joseph Bushell.’ A new sensation sent a tide of crimson to his face, both hands went suddenly up to hide it, and he

groaned and actually cowered. For like a flash of lightning there crossed him for the first time the memory of the insane and pretentious lies he had told his father in America. And with that curdling remembrance came the fear that his father would seek out his mother, and would be brought face to face with *him*. That thought, I am rejoiced to believe, could have been nothing less than horrible. It was certain in the cowering criminal's mind that Cheston would long since have exploded the pretence, and Joseph Bushell would probably be looking somewhat eagerly for the man who had deceived him. *Now*, George could see why the middle-aged stranger in the New York hotel had enquired after Dinah Banks and had played about his memories of the Saracen. *Now* he could see why that supreme old villain George Bushell had written to say that Dinah had married, and he could see too why his father had resolved on returning to England after so long an exile. Everything was clear as noon-day, and nothing was clearer than this—that in spite of the wrongs that had been done him by

his mother, he was not a martyr to his father's eyes or likely to look like one. And—terrible fancy! only too probably to be realised,—would not his father claim his own from George Bushell the elder, and would not he, George Bushell the younger, be left scornfully and contemptuously in the cold as payment for the poor fraud he had practised? It was no wonder when all this rushed upon him in one sickening torrent of dismay and shame, that he blushed and hid his face and groaned.

To Dinah the whole thing looked like repentance, and more than ever her motherly, tender, self-accusing heart yearned over the scamp before her, and she threw her arms about him and wept above him, with tears of agony and holy joy, and covered with hungry kisses the hands that hid his face.

‘Try to be good, my dear. Try to be sorry, an’ God’ll forgive you, my poor sufferin’ child. That’s right, my darlin’! Cry a bit. It’ll ease your heart, my poor dear darlin’ George.’

And clinging to him still, she began to pray

in broken murmurs for forgiveness for herself and him ; and holy heroism and base vice ashamed mingled their tears together.

Whatever joy the angels feel over a sinner turned from the evil of his ways, was hers in that moment, and it atoned for much. There was no thought in her mind that the world owed her an atonement, and so, the blessing coming as a gift, and not claimed as a desert, was multiplied a thousand times in sweetness. *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* She gave forgiveness.

Dinah was safe anyhow, even if the newly-discovered father should appear again and intervene. So ran the rascal's thoughts. It was his part now to crook the pregnant hinges of the knee where thrift might follow fawning. It was not easy to be affectionate to Dinah all at once, even though she had proclaimed herself his mother, and not his sister. But it was little trouble to receive her caresses, since the mere endurance of them bade fair to be profitable.

What with hope and fear and rage and

wonder and the sickness of privation and excess, he was in a condition pitiable to behold. Dinah, feeding her life-long hunger upon her own avowal of motherhood, translated penitence into him and affection, and all worthy shame and trembling honest hopes, and loved him for the attributes her own fancy gave him. In his mind, the first shock of remembrance being over, there remained a sensation of singular discomfort, which was yet not without an element of relief. If he had made an enemy, he had a friend, and it was likely that the forgery alone would have been enough to disgust his father. Dinah would help him to get abroad again, perhaps, before the much-deceived father could get hold of him. Some of the yarns the San Francisco host had told of his own past life had dealt with rough and tumble fighting here and there, and Joseph Bushell, though he had made no boast of the part he had taken in such enforced frays as he had mentioned, had worn a look whilst he spoke of them which seemed to betoken a certain joy in battle. He was a big broad-should-

dered fellow, and could probably have broken young George across his knee like a dry stick. George confessed within himself that he had given provocation, and in case of his father's appearance on the scene he was prepared to run and trust to Dinah's generosity for supplies.

'You'd best stay in the same place for a bit, my dear,' said his mother, wiping her eyes, and speaking still with a sobbing catch in her voice, 'an' I'll get more money an' send it to you. I don't know what father'll say when he knows, an' I doubt he'll be hard at first.'

George answered nothing, but took advantage of his search for a pocket-handkerchief to slip her gift into his pocket, and with his eyes hidden, stretched forth the copy of the marriage certificate towards his mother. She took it from him and folded it, and at that moment the noise of a horse's feet disturbed them both. They turned towards the town, walking slowly, and a horseman passed them without notice. Even so slight an incident helped to restore their self-possession, and Dinah a minute later

kissed him tenderly and bade him good-bye for the time being. He returned her caress for the first time since he had been a mere lad, and the mother's heart stored up that mercenary kiss and counted it in his favour. She dropped her veil and walked away without looking back again, and George strolled about the lanes to wear off the traces of his discomposure before returning to the town. Apart from his father, his troubles at last seemed over, but there was enough of doubt in the case to keep his heart in a continual flutter.

Now, being ignorant of John Keen's change of residence, our young rascal had addressed his letter to the old home town, and the post-master there had forwarded it, so that on the day of Dinah's encounter with her son the lawyer had received the unexpected and astounding news of the 'lost prisoner's presence in England. With the letter in his pocket-book, he took train for the midland capital, and there found Joseph Bushell at his hotel in mournful consultation with Cheston.

‘Read that, Mr. Bushell,’ he said, laying down the epistle before him.

‘What is it?’ asked Joe, taking it up. ‘Hillo!’ he exclaimed, as his eye fell upon the superscription, ‘this is uncommonly like the fist of that *soi-disant* brother of yours, Cheston.’

‘Eh?’ cried the Baronet. ‘Nonsense! You don’t say so? What’s he got to say for himself?’

‘The letter is from your son, Mr. Bushell,’ said John Keen gravely. ‘I received it to-day. To-morrow he will call at the Post-Office at Borton for an answer. Before answering it I consult you. Pray read it.’

Joe read it, and his face grew white. With bent head and gaze fixed upon the floor he pushed it across to Cheston.

‘What do you make of it?’ he asked after a pause.

‘I’ll tell you what I make of it,’ shouted Cheston, rising and striking the table with a heavy hand. ‘That thundering old rascal of an uncle of yours never gave the lad a penny

after all, but got him free and turned him loose. Gave him the slip, the old fox, I'll bet a thousand pounds !'

'We shall see,' Joe answered, still staring at the floor. After a while he lifted his pale face and looked at Keen. 'Will you go to Borton with me to meet him?'

'Most willingly,' said John.

'Will you start now? By the next train?'

'Certainly.'

'I am using you very cavalierly, old friend,' said Joe with a pitiable forced smile at Cheston; 'asking you here to dinner and then running away from you in this fashion.'

'You don't want an army with you,' returned Cheston, 'or I'd volunteer. I wish you success, and if I can do anything for you here or anywhere, command me.'

'No,' Joe answered. 'I don't think you can do anything.'

It was plain that his thoughts were far away from his speech, and Cheston, taking Joe's right hand in both his own, shook it with

great heartiness, and left his old friend and the young lawyer to themselves.

‘I believe, Mr. Keen,’ said Joe miserably enough, ‘that the writer of this letter is the young man I met in America—the man who pretended to be Cheston’s brother. The hand-writings are alike, and the young fellow I met was intimately acquainted with the district, and knew all the people.’

‘I suppose that if you saw a photograph you would know,’ said John.

‘Certainly,’ Joe returned.

‘If you will go on to Borton,’ John continued; ‘I will stop at Wrethedale, and join you an hour or two later, bringing a photograph with me. You don’t know the town I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Joe. ‘I was never there in my life.’

‘You had better put up at the Hare and Hounds in Wedge Street,’ said John. ‘A very quiet quaint old house, not the best in the town, but opposite the Post-office, and convenient for our purpose. I will join you there.’

Joe had little heart for converse outside the theme that filled his mind, and but little heart indeed to speak of that more than seemed needful. So the journey was made quietly, and from the little station at Wrethedale Joe travelled on alone. He went to the house to which he had been directed, carrying his own portmanteau, and asked for a bedroom. The rosy chambermaid led him up a flight of old oak steps, and along a corridor full of traps in the way of descending and ascending stairs, and finally landed him in a queer three-cornered room with an outlook on the garden.

‘Anything to eat, sir?’ asked the rosy chambermaid.

‘Not yet,’ said the guest, and being left alone, he opened the window, lit a cigar, and began to smoke sadly. He had kept his son’s letter to John Keen, and he now read it over and over again. It was terrible to think that the crime and folly which had brought his son to the pass therein described were chiefly traceable to him, and yet he could scarce do otherwise

than think so. It was natural in him to accuse himself for all. 'I am destitute,' so he read: 'my feet are bare, my clothes in rags . . . I am compelled to move about from place to place to get workhouse shelter and a casual tramp's poor fare.' How was Joe to say that his son had deserved to suffer in this way? Give everybody his deserts and would *he* escape whipping?

He sat thinking thus, and bearing a heavy punishment for the misdoing of his youth until John Keen rejoined him.

'Have you brought the photograph?' Joe asked, recognising John in the darkness.

'Yes. Wait a minute whilst I light a candle. Is that the man?'

That was the man sure enough. Not an ill-looking man either, by any means. A young man who held his head aloft rather haughtily, and who imposed upon the beholder with a certain pretence of being a great deal handsomer than he really was, as is the way with some people.

'Yes,' said Joe. 'This is the man who

called himself George Cheston when I met him in the States.'

'It is my old schoolfellow and companion George Banks,' said John; 'your son, George Bushell.'

The unhappy father nodded and set down the photograph.

'He musn't see me in the morning until you have him safely,' he said after a long pause. 'He might want to run away from me again. He has been a bad lot, Mr. Keen, but I must do the best I can with him. I'll fasten a weekly allowance on him in such a way that he can't forestall it, and that will keep him honest—in money matters.'

'You'll have some dinner, Mr. Bushell?' asked John.

'Yes,' said Joe. 'You'd better order it. Have you got a room?'

'Not yet,' John answered, pulling at the bell. 'I'll see about one now.'

The rosy chambermaid appearing, the young lawyer went away with her to see after his room and order dinner, and Joe smoked on

by the light of his solitary candle, staring at the photograph and failing to read in it any sign of the wickedness its original had shown. After a lapse of half an hour or so, John returned and found him thus employed.

‘Dinner is ready,’ said he. ‘Shall we go down?’

Joe assented and John led the way. The coffee-room was a good-sized oblong chamber panelled with old oak and dimly illuminated by a dozen candles. One guest was there before them, a young man dressed in a cheap-looking tweed suit which fitted him none too well. He was standing at the fire regarding a sporting print above the mantelpiece, and his back was turned to the new-comers. Without moving his head he addressed the waitress, who in clean white apron and cap was going round the table, touching the knives and forks.

‘I say,’ said the young man in the tweed suit, ‘bring me another bottle of that claret, and take the chill off it this time, will you? You can take it into the billiard-room, and you

can let me have one or two of your best cigars at the same time.'

There was nothing very amazing in the speech just cited, but at the very first words of it the new-comers started, and stared with wondering eyes upon each other.

'Your dinner, gentlemen,' said the neat waitress.

Joe nodded, and she bustled from the room.

'Stand by the door,' Joe whispered, and John with a backward step felt for the key and turned it in the lock.

Joe walked swiftly up the room and at the very second when the young man in the tweed suit turned round at the noise of the shooting bolt he laid a hand like a vice upon each arm, and said,

'So, Mr. Cheston.'

The merest shadow of an attempt to free himself showed the young man that flight was out of the question. But if force could not avail him, was it not possible that finesse might serve? *Perhaps* Joseph Bushell might be

‘bluffed’ into the belief that he had been led away by an astonishing likeness.

‘Sir,’ he returned therefore, with an indignant drawing up of his figure, ‘you have the advantage of me.’

‘George, my lad,’ said Joe grimly, ‘if you lie to me, or attempt to lie to me again, I’ll break every bone in your body.’

Since he had known of a son’s existence he had pictured many meetings with him, but none like this.

‘So you’re destitute, are you?’ Joe went on; ‘your feet are bare—your clothes in rags. You move about from place to place to get workhouse shelter and a casual tramp’s poor fare! Whom have you robbed now? Who is your last quarry? Keen,’ he cried with an almost hysteric bitterness, ‘look at this fellow. This forger and impostor, and liar, who knows neither of us. Shouldn’t I be a happy man to come home after six and twenty years of exile and find a son like this!’

And having said this, he was moved by an impulse which I will not characterise. He

swung the impostor round and kicked him into a corner of the room, where he lay in a heap, guarding his head with his arms; and Joe towered over him with a rage amounting to pure anguish in his heart.

‘If I had met this hound in trouble,’ he began—and there his own accusing conscience staggered him so that he had nothing more to say, but he ground his teeth and clenched his hands in a miserable compound of remorse and anger. George gathered himself into smaller compass in his corner, and eyed his assailant with watchful tremor. John put himself between assailant and assailed, but did it in a casual and unostentatious way.

‘If I had met him in trouble,’ Joe began again. ‘If I had seen him as I expected to see him, I could have had some kindness for him, and some forgiveness for him.’ He made a motion of despair and misery, and John, not reading it rightly, gave a brisk step forward. ‘I shan’t hit him again,’ cried Joe, observing this sign. ‘Stand up, you melancholy dog, stand up!’



'George eyed his ass afloat with watchful tremor.'



The melancholy dog, with furtive fear in his eyes, stood up.

‘Now,’ said his father, ‘if I find you trying to deceive me again, I’ll hand you over to the police for the trick you played me in the States, and thrash you within an inch of your life before I do it. Will you oblige me, Mr. Keen, by unlocking the door? There is someone knocking at it. Sit down, sir.’

George, with his fears still furtively peeping from his eyes, sat down, and John unlocked the door. The neat maid, a trifle scared, looked round and announced that the claret was in the billiard-room.

‘The gentleman is engaged for the present,’ said John blandly. ‘Will you kindly bring it here?’

The girl obeyed, and during her brief absence not a word was spoken. She looked from one to the other when she brought in the wine, and reminded John that the soup was cooling.

‘Thank you,’ said John, still bland and suave. ‘We are engaged just now. We have

business with this gentleman. You can send up the dinner when I ring for it. In the meantime let us have this room to ourselves.'

The girl disappeared, and John locked the door again, but pausing with the key in his hand, he asked,

'Would you like to be alone, Mr. Bushell?'

'No,' Joe answered. 'Come here. Now, sir,' turning upon George, 'I am going to have the truth out of you by hook or by crook. What brings you here? What have you been doing since you gave me the slip at Liverpool.'

George showed no disposition to begin, but at a threatening movement on the questioner's part he opened his narrative.

'I went to Newcastle-on-Tyne,' he said, 'and tried to get employment. But everybody wanted a certificate of character, and I couldn't give one. Then I went to Durham, and there it was the same. So I had to sell my things.'

'Mine,' thought Joe, remembering the stolen portmanteau, but he said nothing.

'And I didn't know where my people were,' pursued the criminal, 'and I had to

wander about the country. I wrote at last to Mr. Keen when I was nearly dying, but last night I got to a place called Wrethedale, about five and twenty miles from here, and——'

There he began to weep again.

'Well?' said Joe, sternly.

'I met a lady,' piped the weeping George, 'a lady I used to know, before——' He drew forth a pink-edged cheap handkerchief and sobbed into it. 'Mr. Keen knows her. She gave me nearly four pounds, and I bought some clothes. I *was* in rags,' he protested, 'I was really. And I was nearly dying. Mr. Keen can ask her if I wasn't.'

'You have had a pretty good dinner,' said Joe, glancing at the *débris* on the table, 'and you can afford your two bottles of claret to it. And a château wine, as I'm alive!' he cried, laying a hand on the mourning George's second bottle. 'Now, you didn't come here from Wrethedale and buy those clothes and pay a day's hotel bill on this scale out of nearly four pounds. Where did you get the rest of the money from?'

No answer.

‘Or are you going to rob the hotel people?’

‘No,’ cried George. ‘I have money to pay them. Dinah has been here to-day.’ This was addressed to John Keen, and left both his hearers under the impression that the scamp was still ignorant of his parentage. But Joe took that bull by the horns, resolved to have no more mysteries or misunderstandings than it seemed unavoidable to leave.

‘Do you know that you are related to me?’ he asked, sickening at the question even as he put it.

‘Yes,’ said the other, still sobbing into the cheap handkerchief.

‘Do you know the nature of the relationship?’ Joe asked again.

‘Yes,’ snuffled George under his breath.

‘Who told you?’ Joe demanded.

‘Dinah told me,’ said George, avoiding his father’s eye and directing the answer to John Keen.

‘Did she tell you of her own relationship to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘When did she tell you these things?’

‘This morning.’

‘You are my son,’ said Joe. ‘God help me and forgive me. And I will deal by you as best I can—as well as you will let me. Let me see signs of amendment in you, or it will not be well for you. I shall not be ready to read the signs too easily, and you shall not look for a life of idleness and good-for-nothing luxury at my hands. I have left my duty undone, and I owe many atonements, even to you.’ It cost him a good deal to confess as much, but he was bent on doing his duty now, and this seemed part of it. ‘But you are one who will need a tight hand, and you shall have it. And now, you can go to your room. I have no fear of your running away, for you are not too proud a dog to eat dirty puddings, and you see your way already to getting a little money out of me when you can work up a fit of penitence.’

Under these scathing words George did begin to feel a little cur-like, and he had to

admit that he had done something to deserve them. But even here appearances were wretchedly against him, and he felt it as a keen misfortune that he should have been rehabilitated before his newly-discovered father chanced upon him. A single day of luxury was dearly purchased at the price he had paid for it.

He crept from the room with his head hanging, and when he reached his own chamber he began to cast about in his mind for the best and wisest course to adopt with this muscular and outspoken father. Would it pay to run away to begin with, refusing his aid on the ground that he was unworthy to receive it, and so wording a penitent letter that it might indicate a clue to his whereabouts, without seeming to do so. He even began to sketch the half-projected letter in his mind. He recalled a sentence from the parable of the Prodigal Son which bade fair to come in with good effect. He would be quite heart-brokenly penitent, and yet display a lingering touch of magnanimity. It would look a little worthier in him to admit his unworthiness. And you

must understand that in the nature of this young man—though all this was as clearly outlined in intention as I have made it seem—it was not altogether hollow and insincere. While he wept for shame and humiliation, he was thinking that his weeping at all was a manly sign in him, and he knew the while that if he wrote that letter he would let new tears fall on it, and he looked for a certain effect that way. Yet, even for him, penitence meant something more than the misery of being detected. Of course a man who really knew how to repent could never have been guilty of young George's particular crimes. A man who has the power to repent nobly may sin much, but hardly in that way. No lion, however degenerate, takes to weaving spider's webs. George's penitence was like his offences, as yours and mine are.

As he sat, half resolving in his uncourageous soul to do this thing and seem a little better than he was in his own eyes and his father's, a tap came to the door, and John Keen entered.

‘Your father has deputed me to speak to you about a matter of importance,’ said John.

‘He wishes you distinctly to understand that any hopes of his assistance you may entertain will depend upon your obedience in this matter. Your mother is not yet aware of his presence in England. She does not even know that he is still alive, and until he can see his way more clearly than he can at present he desires that she shall hear nothing of him. I suppose I may tell him that you respect his wish? You will see your mother again in a little time. Will you undertake—remembering what hangs upon it—to drop no hint of your father’s presence in England—to drop no hint of your having ever seen him anywhere?’

‘Yes,’ said George; ‘I promise faithfully. Keen,’ he added, rising and breaking into tears anew, ‘*you* won’t believe that I wrote you that letter and pretended to be starving when I wasn’t. I give you my word of honour it was true.’

‘I see no reason to doubt you,’ said John, somewhat coldly. He could hardly fail to remember that this good young man had quarrelled with him on the ground that he was not

moral enough for the good young man to know him any longer. 'I may take your promise?'

'Yes,' said George, and the messenger turned to leave. 'Keen,' cried the criminal, 'I know I've acted like a blackguard, but I'm not so bad as people think me. I never meant to stick to that money, and I won enough on Erebus to put it back. And I haven't—I haven't—I haven't a friend in the world!'

And so, once more, the young man mistook self-pity for repentance.

CHAPTER XXIX.

JOE left Borton next morning, but before he did so he had another interview with his son.

‘Understand,’ said Joe, ‘that I mean to do my best by you. And understand that the best I can do for you seems to me to set your nose to the grindstone and keep it there. Mr. Keen will find you employment, and everything you hope from me will depend upon the way in which you conduct yourself. You will have the manliness to tell your mother that you need no further help from her, and that you are resolved to work out by yourself an atonement for your own misdeeds. If you accept one penny-piece from her you forfeit all claim on me. Try to be a man,’ said Joe with a shaky voice. ‘Try to be honest. And so

good-bye, sir. When I can shake hands with you without feeling soiled by it, I will.'

Having made arrangements with the lawyer for the furtherance of his ideas concerning young George, Joe started back for his hotel, and on his lonely journey he set himself to unravel the tangled strands of the net which held him. He had made up his mind not to reveal himself to Dinah, and being all along in a mood to do penance, he held hard to his resolve—held the harder for his own strong inclination to go against it. There was an intense longing in his heart to comfort her, and there was a dreadful fear that the proclamation of himself would but bring a new sorrow to her. He put by that trying problem for the time, as he had done before, not yet being able to solve it. And then he set to work to think about Uncle George. It was beyond doubt that Uncle George had been a rascal, but then who was Joe Bushell that he should judge anybody, or be severe beyond necessity even with so bad an old man as his benevolent relative had proved?

‘Why should one scoundrel venture to be hard upon another?’ Joe asked himself. ‘He’s been a bad lot, but so have I.’

He would have justice and no more. Even if old George got better it was impossible that he should fight the case. There were too many dangers in it. And if he died there would be an end of everything so far as he was concerned, for Dinah could claim the money. Yet there would be a necessity for exposure there, and Dinah had kept her secret so long and so closely that even for her child’s sake Joe could see that it would be hard to proclaim it to the world. There was one thing which seemed possible for the returned exile to do. If old George should recover the use of his intellect, though only for a day, Joe had power enough over him to compel him on any way he chose. He could compel him to make surrender to Dinah and to keep his secret. Such a hold as Joe had upon him no man could afford to disregard or defy. And out of this reflection arose a plan, and out of this plan

arose in turn the incidents which closed the romance of Joe's story.

Once arrived in Birmingham, he had a horse saddled, and rode over to his old chum Cheston.

‘Cheston,’ he broke out at once on meeting him, ‘I want to be constantly in the neighbourhood of my Uncle George. I want to be the first to know of his getting better, and if he needs any persuasion when the time comes, I want to be on the spot to give it.’

‘He'll want no persuasion,’ said Cheston. ‘The sword hangs by a hair, and he'll be precious hasty in getting from under it.’

‘He might recover his senses and then die in a day or two before anything was done,’ urged Joe. ‘Then there would be a disputed will, and no end to the publicity of the case.’

‘The doctor thinks that he'll live to be moderately strong again,’ said Cheston.

‘Leave me to my own plan,’ said Joe with something of his youthful obstinacy. ‘I want to watch him, I want to be near him to lend

a helping hand to my wife's case if it should be needed. And I want you to give me a berth of some sort.'

'Eh?' said the Baronet.

'I don't want a salary,' said Joe, misunderstanding the cause of his friend's astonishment; 'I want something to do, just to prevent my being in the neighbourhood from looking odd. My name is Jones,' he went on with a faint unmirthful grin. 'It runs in the family to take aliases. I am an *employé* of Sir Sydney Cheston's. I do anything which allows me to live in the parish unnoticed and unobserved. Nobody will know me. Give me my way, Cheston. And I'll tell you what it is besides. I want to see the old place and some of the old faces, if there are any left. I'm number sixteen at the hotel. There's no name on my luggage. Not a soul knows me except yourself and young Keen. and that wretched boy of mine. Let me have my way.'

'Well,' said the Baronet, half laughing and half puzzled, 'what can you do? Do you

know anything about mines? You used to, but things are changed a good deal, and it's a long time ago.'

'I worked in a coal mine in the Dominion,' said Joe; 'but that's twenty years since.'

'You could do a little fancy inspecting, perhaps. Or, let me see. Bowker is a reliable man, and young Gavan broke his leg last week. Yes, that'll do. Gavan was managing man at a new pit of mine called "The Buzzard." I don't know why they call it so, so don't ask me. Gavan broke his leg, and Bowker, his subordinate, has been carrying on the work. Now you might take Gavan's place. Leave Bowker alone pretty much, you know, and take his advice about things. He's a thoroughly practical man, one of the old rough sort, but a very decent fellow.'

'All right,' said Joe; 'I'll undertake to be worth what I draw from you, and no more. Can you send my horse back and drive me over?'

'What!' cried Cheston with a merry laugh. 'Drive a mere mine manager! Me! Well, I

don't mind giving you a lift. I'll order the dog-cart.'

Every yard they drove had at one time been familiar to young Joe Bushell, and middle-aged Joe Bushell remembered the way well. After a mile or two they passed the very field in which young Joe had first kissed Dinah and told her how fond of her he was. Poor Dinah! The kiss had been a betrayal, though he had not meant it so. A mile or two later came George Bushell's house, and a little farther on the Saracen, all stuccoed and bedizened with plate glass and gilt lettering. Then before long the dog-cart turned into a lumpy lane and began to jolt and roll in a threatening manner, and in a while, rounding an artificial hill of mine refuse, they came in sight of the tall stack of the Buzzard and the raw red brick-work of the Buzzard's offices.

A miner came forward to hold the Baronet's horse.

'This way, Mr. Jones, if you please,' cried Cheston with a broad grin. 'Ah! that's you,

Mr. Bowker. I wish to speak to you. Come into the offices.'

Joe took a look at Mr. Bowker and gave a little start beholding him. Mr. Bowker, in spite of the years which intervened between the present and Joe's knowledge of him, was still recognisable as one who had done odd work for Joe's father in his youth. Mr. Bowker, for his part, looked at Joe, but with no unusual regard.

'Mr. Bowker,' said Sir Sydney, taking a seat on a rough-hewn stool in the office, 'this is Mr. Jones, who will take Gavan's place for the time being.'

'Very well, sir,' said Mr. Bowker, regarding the new-comer with no particular favour.

'I have given him instructions,' said Sir Sydney with preternatural gravity, belied by a twinkle in his eye as he looked at Joe, 'not to disturb any arrangements on which you may have attempted up to this time, and I hope you'll get on well together.'

'I hope so tew,' returned Mr. Bowker, with an unfavouring glance at Joe's watch-chain and

his well-cut though unassuming garments of dark tweed.

‘You’ll want lodgings, Mr. Jones,’ said Cheston with his eyes twinkling and his face a mask of gravity.

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Joe.

Mr. Bowker turned sheer round and stared at him. Then he turned again and caught the twinkle in the Baronet’s eye.

‘Your naäm’s no more Jones than mine is,’ he cried. ‘Why it’s young master Joseph! Lord, love me! I ought to ha’ knowed you in a glawnce, like. Why, bless my soul, I bin glad to see thee. But when I heerd thee spake I knowed thee. Shaäk honds, ode mon, shaäk honds!’

Joe shook hands heartily, but he turned a moment later to Cheston, and looked at him with a somewhat rueful smile.

‘So much for my plot,’ he said. ‘William,’ he added, turning to the beaming Mr. Bowker, ‘I didn’t expect you to know me.’

‘Lord love thee,’ said William, ‘I should ha’ knowed thee anywheer!’

‘So *I* said, Bushell,’ cried the Baronet.
‘So *I* said.’

‘I don’t want it to be known that I’m back again,’ said Joe. Mr. Bowker’s eyes opened wide at this, but he said nothing, ‘My uncle is very ill, as I daresay you know,’ he continued, ‘and I don’t want him to know that I am here at present.’

‘I see,’ said William briskly. ‘Th’ ode fox has had your feyther’s money, an’ now he’ll ha’ to turn it up, I reckon. Hewray!’

‘You seem to bear him no good will?’ said Joe.

‘Not me! Why, he gi’en me the sack at a minute’s notice,’ said William; ‘an’ all for tekin’ the part of a woman as was i’ trouble, as he was a blackguardin’. You remember her! Miss Banks. Her brother was took up for forgin’ ode Bushell’s naäm, en’ her went to him to beg him off, and he miscalled her all o’er the plaäs. An’ I ups an’ spakes to him. “Shut up!” I says, “Yo’de rip,” I says, “wheer’s your bowells?” An’ he turns o’ me, and he says, “tek a minute’s notice,” he says, “an’

leave my empl'y," he says. Oh, he's a bitter hard un, he is. Well, send I may live! I bin glad to see thee, Master Joseph, real righteous right-down glad, an' that's the trewth.'

In the new handskaking that ensued Joe threw in a little extra pressure for Dinah's defender.

'I wanted to stop in the neighbourhood, William,' he said, reluctant to abandon his plan. 'And I didn't want to be known. Do you think anybody else would know me?'

'Well, I doubt they would,' said William reflectively. 'But theer ain't a lot o' th' ode uns left not now. Not one on 'em works here. Yo' might live i' my cottage if yo're i' want o' lodgins', an' welcome. An' yo' could tek to wearin' a pair o' blew glasses. Dr. Hodgetts he's took to em, an' I went by wi'out knowin' him on'y yesterday. They are a real mazin' disguise—blew glasses.'

'Well, I won't try the blue glasses,' said Joe, 'but I'll stop and take my chance.' There was more in his resolve than he expressed. What if he *were* known, and the general know-

ledge brought him back to Dinah? He feared; but might he not make her happy after all? Ah! if once she took him back again he would so surround her with observances of love and tenderness that he would half atone—No, no! that was impossible. But he would try to make her happy for the future—if they came together again. ‘I’ll have no alias, Cheston,’ he cried suddenly. ‘It would look base to be detected under such a disguise. But I’ll stay here and take my chance. Bushell is a common name enough. I can trust you, William?’

‘I shan’t breathe a synnable,’ said staunch William, ‘till you gien me leave.’

‘Now Joe, old man,’ said Cheston, with a friendly hand on his shoulder, ‘I call this a step in the right direction.’

‘I hope it will prove so,’ answered Joe.

And so at his own proper cost the returned exile lived in Mr. Bowker’s cottage. He bought coarser tweeds and a billycock hat, and fiddled about the mine, making journeys into the bowels of the earth at times, and holding

grave consultations with Mr. Bowker as to the progress of the work in hand. Long years of business habits had left upon him the necessity for occupation, and he began by-and-by to take a real interest in the work. The rapidity with which he revived old knowledge and mastered new impressed Mr. Bowker greatly, but Joe kept his eye upon the real business he had in hand, and was keen after news of old George. He found, in the bar parlour of the Dudley Arms of an evening, a generation who knew him not. Two or three oldsters were there whom he had faintly known in his early days, and when he heard their names he could call them to remembrance, but none of them made any guess as to his identity. He was extremely silent and reserved amongst them, smoking his pipe and sitting behind his 'Times' as he listened to their talk. Old George's illness was a common topic, and old George's doctor was a nightly guest; so that such news as was to be had, he got at without the risk of questioning. A week or two of immunity from recognition seemed to make him safe.

In the meantime John Keen had found employment at Borton for young George, and sent news that the criminal was buckling-to with a will, and promised all sorts of amendment. What the heir-presumptive to a quarter of a million thought of working as a clerk at five-and-thirty shillings a week, and living on that sum, was not to be got at, but it is certain that for the time being he bore it well, and news reached his father that he had strenuously refused Dinah's proffered aid, in accordance with instructions.

After two or three weeks of waiting, there came news of a decisive change in old George's condition, and Joe learned that in the course of a few days it was possible that the old man might be allowed to look at business once again. He sent the news to John Keen, and John came down on the strength of it and saw the doctor, who denied him access to the sick man for the present, but undertook to pave the way for him.

The frustrated schemer had been groping in his mind in a dim and feeble way, and had

at length discovered the mental chamber in which, hidden under all manner of rubbish and *débris*, lay the remembrance of the lawyer's visit, and his own denial of his crime. And when the doctor set before him the fact that Mr. Keen was again in the neighbourhood waiting to see him, the old fellow, with a sort of inward earthquake, recognised the folly and madness of resistance. He had sinned in vain, and his sin had found him out. He had given a hundred pounds to Joseph—that was something. It soothed his heart a little to think of that one generous deed, the only one he could recall, though he tried hard to remind himself of his own virtues as a set-off to the account an offended God certainly held against him. The pangs of affrighted conscience were terrible to him, but these alone might have been fought down. There was no fighting young Keen and the evidence of the sexton, or if there were, he was broken and no longer had the pluck for it.

These miseries retarded recovery, but body and mind obstinately insisted on getting

stronger, and he had to see John Keen at last. The old man's skin was of the colour of the film which gathers on stale unbaked bread, and his eyes were fishy and watery. His mouth was drawn down purselike at the corners, and the inner ends of his eyebrows were drawn upwards, so that he wore a mask expressive of feeble misery. John had expected a change in him, but was yet surprised to see him look so wretched.

‘I’ve been a thinkin’ over the news as you give me, Mr. Keen,’ he said in quavering tones, ‘an’ if you prove your case I’m willin’ to do justice. But five an’ twenty thousand pound is a large sum to part with on anythin’ but good evidence.’

‘Mr. Bushell,’ said John gravely, ‘I beg you not to try to deceive me, or to force me into measures which I should regret.’

‘Well, forty thousand’s a good round sum,’ said old George.

‘Pray understand, Mr. Bushell,’ said John quietly, ‘that we cannot content ourselves with anything less than the restoration of the

whole of your brother Joseph's fortune. Let me tell you what we know. I shall tell you nothing I am not in a position to prove. You purposely widened the quarrel between your nephew Joseph and his parents. You withheld from him all knowledge of his father's death, and you wrote to him, when you had held for a year the fortune which belonged to him, saying that his wife had married again, and so prevented his return to England.'

Old George's mouth opened, and his fishy eyes widened with a look so ghastly that the lawyer paused. The unbaked pie-crust complexion changed to a deep crimson, and changed again to a dull leaden colour, and for a minute or two John feared that his listener would succumb to the news. He rose and mixed a tumbler of wine and water and held it to the old man's lips. By-and-by the patient recovered, and returned to his former aspect.

'Must I go on and distress you with the memory of these misdeeds?' John asked. 'We know everything. We have been in

communication with the Governor of the jail. Your late private secretary is again in England. Why should you bring misery and disgrace upon yourself by resisting us ?'

'I bain't a-resistin' anybody,' said old George feebly and miserably. 'I'm willin' to do justice. A hundred thousand pound's a lot o' money, but I'm willin' to do justice.'

'You are not near the amount yet, Mr. Bushell,' John returned. 'The title-deeds of all the landed property of which your brother Joseph died possessed, and the papers relating to his funded properties, are still in existence. When we come to business we shall be able to refresh your memory.'

The wretched defeated old schemer groaned.

'The houses was good for nothin', an' was all sold at a loss,' he protested. 'The money's all mixed up along o' mine. I bain't agooiin' to be made a pauper on. Mind that, now.'

But this feeble spark of resistance died out when John answered him :

'I am sorry to say, Mr. Bushell, that you

have not deserved any merciful consideration at our hands. I shall accept no compromise.'

'Am I agooi' to be made a pauper on?' quavered the wretched old George. 'Answer me that, Mr Keen. Am I agooi' to be made a pauper on.'

'You must be thankful, Mr. Bushell,' John responded, 'that we do not take criminal measures against you. Be glad that your wickedness is to be punished so lightly.'

'My brother Joseph meant to leave a lot of his money to me,' cried George tremulously. 'He allays said so, an' he made a will an' did it. Am I agooi' to be robbed o' that?'

'Mr. Bushell,' said John, 'we will take back every penny-piece of which you wrongfully possessed yourself. Thank us, when you come to reason again, that we do no more. We have been merciful to you, and we desire to be merciful still, but so far as your brother Joseph's fortune is concerned we shall insist upon strict justice. May I see yo'ur lawyer now?'

‘No,’ cried George feebly; ‘I’ll deal with him myself. You come here at twelve to-morrow, an’ I’ll have him here. I bain’t strong enough to do no more talkin’ to-day. I’m tired.’

‘Very good, Mr. Bushell,’ said John. ‘At twelve to-morrow.’

The young lawyer took his way, not without some pity for the broken schemer. He wrote that afternoon two accounts of his interview, despatching one to Joe and the other to Dinah, and on the morrow at midday he presented himself anew at old George’s house. Mr. Packmore, that elderly conveyancer who had once on a time recommended Ethel to John Keen’s services, had not yet arrived, and George was alone.

‘Mr. Keen,’ he said, in a stronger voice than that of yesterday, ‘if I’m agooiin’ to do justice it’s fair as I should come off wi’ no disgrace.’

‘That depends upon yourself, Mr. Bushell,’ John answered. ‘It is not necessary for Mr. Packmore to know more than the mere fact:

that I can prove Dinah Banks's marriage to Joseph Bushell.'

But when Mr. Packmore came he turned out to be a very hard conveyancer indeed, and by no means willing to believe that his client was ready to surrender so huge a slice of his great fortune. In his opinion—as up to that time advised—the case ought to be fought, if only for the sake of securing a complete proof. But finding that his client objected most savagely and obstinately to any fight being made, he gave in.

'Very well, Mr. Bushell,' he said at last with quiet desperation. 'I'll go over to Waston Church as a mere matter of form, anyway, and look at the original entry.'

'Yo' do anythin' of the sort, if you dare,' cried old George in a half-frenzy.

The elderly lawyer looked at him in amazement, and confided to John Keen his opinion that really Mr. Bushell was not in a fit condition to transact business just at present.

'On our side,' John answered, 'we cannot admit of any delay. Mr. Bushell is fully per-

suaded of the validity of our claim, and wishes to do justice.'

'It's an odd business,' said the conveyancer, 'and one that I have no stomach for.' They were outside the house by this time. 'You have some hold upon him, Mr Keen—something I don't know of.'

'Mr. Packmore,' said John, with infinite dryness, 'I am at your service in this matter whenever you choose. In the interest of all parties I think we had better get it over quickly.'

The two legal gentlemen met again next day, and the elder looked extremely grave.

'Mr. Keen,' he said, *I have* been to Waston Church, and there is no certificate of a marriage there between Joseph Bushell and Dinah Banks.'

'You had better communicate that discovery to your client, Mr. Packmore,' said John. 'This is a certified copy of the original register.' He produced the document from his pocket-book, and again placed it in the conveyancer's hands.

‘Well, the original is not at Waston,’ said the lawyer half angrily.

‘I know it isn’t,’ John returned.

‘Great Heaven!’ cried Mr. Packmore, recoiling as the fancy struck him. ‘Has Mr. Bushell been tampering ——? Under the seal of professional confidence, now!’

‘I can only refer you again to Mr. Bushell,’ John answered. ‘The reasons which actuate him to an unconditional surrender are cogent enough, no doubt, if you can arrive at them.’

‘Quite right to be discreet, Mr. Keen,’ said the elder. ‘But I won’t and can’t accept the responsibility of so vast a transfer without knowing more than I know at present.’

The business was broken off for an hour or two, whilst old George’s lawyer applied the forensic thumbscrew to his client, and after a tough time of it squeezed the truth out of him. Then he came back and relieved himself by a quotation.

‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Mr. Keen,’ said he, ‘than are dreamt of in our philosophy. I should never have

thought it. So respected—and with one foot in the grave.'

'He has explained the absence of the certificate?' asked John.

'To my amazement,' the conveyancer answered.

There was no more hinting at delay, and John wrote two other letters, one to Joe and one to Dinah, announcing that the business was practically at an end. Old George, by his lawyer's advice, prepared to sell up everything and to retire from business, as the only way by which the enormous diminution of his capital could be hidden from the public eye.

CHAPTER XXX.

JOHN KEEN found busier employment through the unexpected revelation Dinah had made to him than he had ever expected to find in Wrethedale. But howsoever busy he might be, there were intervals in which he found time enough to think upon one inexhaustible theme, and that theme, naturally enough for a lover, was the inexpressible charms of Miss Ethel Donne. Perhaps the young man had been in love before, but if he had been, he contrived to forget all about it. There was but one woman in the world, and she less a woman than an angel. Getting at John's thoughts, one would conceive that there never had been any human creature of such perfections, and never again would be. 'There is none like her—none! Nor shall there be till our

summers have deceased.' It is the proper belief of a lover and comes natural to him.

It is not to be said that the young man had—or, being a lover, needed—any very distinct opportunities of close observation on which to base the glorious theorem which he never wearied of propounding. 'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view. But to worship a good woman is surely worth an honest man's while. To be able in married life to recognise no disillusion, but only a gradual toning down of colour—*that* is inevitable, and, like many inevitable things, a blessing—one must have made a better choice and be a better man than the average. But here is a fine-natured, honest-hearted, loyal young fellow in love with a good and charming girl, and if only the girl could be brought to be in love with him, I could find it in my heart to join their hands, with the best hope for their future, and to say, 'Bless you, my children! Bless you!' Playwrights and novelists are the most inveterate of matchmakers.

John's especial disadvantage was that Ethel

knew his condition. Had he always disguised it, she could have looked upon him with greater favour, but now his very attachment made it difficult for her even to like him. Hardly a year and a half had gone by since the man she loved had proved himself a scoundrel, and she *had* loved him, dearly. John felt his case no more hopeful on account of young George's reappearance, though he knew Ethel's change of feeling towards her late lover well enough. But that reappearance had opened a wound which time had not yet healed, and her truer lover knew it.

Sometimes in his consultations with Dinah, Ethel was present, and she was aware of all that went on on that side. Her courage, her faithfulness to friendship, her self-possession, all seemed more than human in John's eyes, and there are no words for his pity and admiration. If only the young lawyer would or could have hidden the too-evident signs of feeling which every look afforded, Ethel under these new circumstances, might have liked him well enough, but, as it was, she fought him off by a

chill abruptness of demeanour altogether unnatural in her, and John, full of warmth as he was within, became frozen on approaching her, except for his eyes, which did her continual homage.

But it is a long lane indeed which has no turning, and the relationship of these two young people underwent a sudden change. Joe had been thinking over the young lawyer's scheme for sounding Dinah's feelings concerning him, and as affairs grew day by day more urgent, and less and less within his own control, the plan began, out of his sheer desperation, to commend itself to him. So that, one evening when John called upon him under cover of the darkness at Mr. Bowker's cottage, the bewildered husband and father capitulated.

'Who is the young lady?' he asked, after reminding John of the hint he himself had given.

'She is a Miss Donne,' answered the young fellow blushing. They sat in Joe's bedroom by the light of a single tallow candle, and the blush passed unnoticed.

‘The girl,’ said Joe, ‘to whom George was engaged to be married?’

‘The same,’ John answered. ‘I can pledge myself to her discretion and to her self-command. And she is so devoted to your wife, sir, that she would do anything for her sake. I want to ask you again to remember how easy the task will be. It seems to me that a very bold hint would be needed before your wife would suspect the meaning of the inquiries.’

‘Since I have been living here,’ said Joe, sitting with both elbows on the table, and staring at the feeble flame of the candle, with his head between his hands, ‘I have learned a good deal about them both—my wife and my son. He ruled her and even bullied her at times. Now she’s going to be wealthy, and she’ll want the control of the lad, and I don’t see how I can keep a hold upon him. I don’t want to neglect my duty any longer. I could take him with me to the West perhaps, but she’d break her heart to lose him without knowing why; and if she knew why, you can see that all the mischief which could come of

my declaring myself would be done, and any chance of good to her in it would be missed. Now, if I could go back to her, and acknowledge myself, and then undertake the care of the lad, and, if need be, go away again and let her see him at times, and know of his well-doing——'

The speaker's voice, though he tried hard to steady it, became so shaky that he had to pause and leave his sentence unfinished.

'You authorise me then,' said John, 'as a first step, to tell Miss Donne the whole story?'

'I am at a deadlock, now,' Joe answered. 'I've seen that it was coming. I must either go away, and let her suffer anew at the hands of that unhappy lad, and suffer she will, unless there is somebody to control him, or I must make myself known to her. But,' he added suddenly with a shrinking of the heart, 'don't let Miss Donne go too far. Let me know, to begin with, whether my going back will be the larger of the two evils. I can well believe it might be.'

'Rely upon it,' said John, 'that all discretion shall be used.'

Joe was fain to be content and to wait, while John went back to the little western village, and set his scheme in motion. Of course it was charming for John to have such a chance of approaching Ethel, and of course it was terrible to him to have to take it. He began by writing a letter :

‘ Dear Miss Donne ’ (he felt ridiculously inclined to set down the first word in capitals)—
‘ I have a secret which most nearly concerns the happiness of your friend Mrs. Joseph Bushell. I believe it’s the one thing in the world she most desires to learn. May I presume to ask your assistance and advice?—Yours most respectfully,
JOHN KEEN.

‘ P.S.—I must beg of you not to drop a hint of this at present to Mrs. Bushell.’

In answer to this brief and somewhat misleading epistle, came an answer delivered by the hands of Mrs. Donne’s little maid-servant. Miss Donne would be obliged if Mr. Keen would call at seven o’clock that evening.

At seven o'clock that evening Mr. Keen called. Ethel sat in the small front parlour to receive him, and, except for the maid-servant, was alone in the house, Mrs. Donne having providentially accepted an invitation to tea. When the girl arose and offered her hand, a most unprofessional flutter started in John's heart, but outwardly he was as cool as a cucumber.

'What is your secret, Mr. Keen?' asked Ethel.

'The secret is not mine, Miss Donne, though I am master of it,' John answered. 'If it belonged to me I would offer it, if I offered it at all, without reservation and without conditions. But I am compelled to ask you, in the first place, to promise that you will not reveal it to Mrs. Bushell without the sanction of the person who is—with her—most interested in it.'

'I promise that,' the girl answered.

'Then,' said John, 'my secret is simply this: her husband is in England.'

Ethel rose and fronted him with her hands

clenched, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes sparkling with anger and surprise.

‘That man is still alive?’ she asked.

‘Before you judge him,’ returned John, ‘let me tell his story. It will not take long. Mr. George Bushell, of whose rascalities you know a little, but not much, was his nephew’s only correspondent. He left the runaway in ignorance of his parents’ death and stuck to the money they left behind them. That you knew or partly knew already. But he wrote in answer to his nephew’s particular inquiries about Miss Dinah Banks, that Dinah Banks had married. Joseph Bushell believed his wife faithless to him and stayed away, until after all these years he learned by a mere accident that this was false, and came over to make inquiries.’

‘And how does all that concern Dinah’s happiness, Mr. Keen?’ asked Ethel. ‘The man has heard that she is going to have the fortune he threw away, and now he comes back to live upon her.’

‘On the contrary,’ said John, ‘he has amassed a fortune of his own. He has been in

England for some months, and at any moment might have claimed the fortune for himself, but has given his best influence to securing it for her.'

'He has been away from her for six-and-twenty years now,' cried Ethel with supreme contempt. 'Let him go away again.'

'Miss Donne,' said the young fellow, warmed on the suffering Joe's behalf, 'you misjudge the man. His wife has not suffered alone. He has endured with her, and he has had great sorrows to bear since his return. When I first met him I had no sympathy with him, but I have learned to know him since then, and I believe that his wife ought to know that he is here. She is not an old woman, and when she has this fortune she will find suitors in plenty. That is inevitable. Suppose she should marry again'—(he inwardly blessed Sir Sydney Cheston for having put that argument into his hands)—'and suppose that afterwards the discovery should be made. That would be horrible, and none of us who have the secret could permit it to happen, but we should have

then to say what we know now; and how could we accept the responsibility of having kept it back from her? She ought to know it.

‘Do you wish me to break the news to her?’ asked Ethel.

‘No,’ cried John, perceiving suddenly that his argument had altogether overshot the mark. Personally, I long to see them together, because I believe that she would be happier after his return than she has ever been since I have known her, but he forbids the immediate revelation of the secret.’

‘If he forbids it——’ Ethel began contemptuously.

‘There is a reason,’ said John. ‘And this is where I beg your help. His old friend Sir Sydney Cheston has done his best to persuade him to return, and I have exhausted all my arguments in the same behalf.’

‘It is a pity to have spent so much good persuasion on such an object, Mr. Keen,’ said Ethel.

‘But he will only return,’ John went on steadfastly, ‘on one condition.’

‘And that is?’ inquired Miss Donne with lofty scorn.

‘That his declaration of himself will bring no new unhappiness on her.’ Ethel was silent. ‘All this time he has been robbed of his fortune, and swindled of his right to a happy married life.’

‘He left her voluntarily,’ said Ethel hotly.

‘And was kept from her by a villanous fraud, Miss Donne. But this is all he has to say through me : that if his declaration of himself can smooth away any troubles she has yet to face, he will declare himself. If it could only add to her unhappiness, he will go away again. Have pity for him, and for your friend, Miss Donne. He asks nothing but the knowledge of his duty. He only waits to know where duty seems to lie.’

‘How can I help him?’ asked Ethel, still scornful. From the first hour of her hearing Dinah’s story she had hated and despised the

runaway husband, and she was not going to change her mind on a sudden. It had been clear all along that he had been a good-for-nothing fellow. Why should she help to surrender Dinah to him again?

‘You could help him by finding out whether his wife still cares for him, and whether she would be glad to have him back,’ John urged gently, refusing to be beaten down by her contempt for Joe.

‘Of course she cares for him! Why else has she kept single all her life, but because she cared for him! That is the way with women,’ cried the girl, trembling with anger and her championship for the woman she loved. ‘They love the wretches who use them so shamefully, and pine after them all their life long. Glad to have him back again? Yes, poor weak thing! I know that well enough, Mr. Keen. But I will have no hand in the plot to bring him back, and I have no thanks for you who come here to ask me to take an office so ignoble. I will not trap my friend into a confession which would bring that man back

again. I love her well enough to deny her wishes there.'

She spoke quietly enough, but with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes, and an utterance unusually rapid.

'You mistake, Miss Donne,' said the young lawyer firmly. It was hard for him to have strengthened the poor opinion she had always held of him, or seemed to hold. 'I came to ask you to perform an act of the truest friendship, and I would rather die than ask you to do anything which would not become you as you are. Forgive me! There are troubles before Mrs. Bushell—unless she has her husband's help to fight them—as great, I fear, as any she has encountered yet, terrible as they have been. The man is not what you believe him, but, I pledge myself for him, a true man, with a kindly, honest heart. He has been hideously defrauded. Think of it, Miss Donne. For three-and-twenty years he lived in the belief that the wife of his youth had been false to him, and for half the time he was struggling with hardship and poverty, whilst that old

villain who had deluded him and robbed him fattened on his fortune. He does not claim the fortune now. Does that say nothing in his favour? I believe with all my heart and soul,' cried John, in a great heat of friendly championship himself by this time, 'that the one thought he has, the one desire he has, is to spend his whole life in atoning to his wife for the sorrows she has borne. And if I believed one tittle less than that I would never have taken up his cause.'

'Mr. Keen,' said Ethel, 'I do you justice enough to believe that you are in earnest, and that he has imposed upon you.'

'If you could but see the man,' said John.

'I do not think my opinion of him at all likely to change,' answered Ethel quietly. 'And I certainly think that since he has stayed away so long he can do nothing better or more generous or kindly than to stay away for good. Dinah will never want to marry again, and Mr. Joseph Bushell has done as much harm as any one man has a right to do. Let him go back to wherever he came from, and take his secret

with him, and leave his wife in peace. If he should come here I should certainly advise Dinah most strongly to give him his fortune and let him go.'

'I am sorry to find you against me in this matter,' said John, and he went away sorrowful.

But before he was half-way down the darkened village street a thought struck him and brought him to a standstill.

'Bravo !' he cried, 'the very ticket !' And with that vulgar exclamation he turned and walked briskly back again. This time he rang the bell at Dinah's house, and being admitted, gave the first shove to his new scheme.

'I have called to say,' he began, 'that everything is now ready for the transfer of your husband's property to your hands. I shall be greatly obliged if you can make it convenient to come down to Birmingham, where Mr. Packmore (who is engaged on the other side) and I can lay the necessary documents before you.'

'I don't want to go down there if I can help it, Mr. Keen,' said Dinah piteously.

‘I’m afraid I must ask you to do it,’ said John, cruel only to be kind. ‘You need not go farther than Birmingham.’

He knew partly how Dinah dreaded a return to the place she had left in such unearned shame.

‘If I must come,’ said Dinah quietly, ‘I must come.’ It was all for the child for whom she had suffered so much. And now that he was beginning to act so nobly, and to struggle for himself, he was ten times more than ever worthy of any suffering she might endure. For the young man had told her, making the best of a bargain he thought unpleasant, that he meant to be a man in future, and had declined her assistance with an air of martyr-like magnanimity inexpressibly affecting.

‘I daresay,’ said John with much innocence, ‘you could persuade Miss Donne to accompany you. We shall not want to keep you more than a day or two.’

‘Make the time as short as you can, Mr. Keen,’ said Dinah. ‘When shall you want me to be ready?’

‘Consult your own convenience,’ cried John, ‘but make it as soon as you like. It will be best to have the business over,’ he added cheerily.

‘Yes,’ Dinah answered. ‘I’ll speak to her about it, and I’ll let you know to-morrow, Mr. Keen.’

On that understanding John went away, and the first result of this small *ruse* of his was that Ethel and Dinah and he all travelled down to the Midland capital together on the following afternoon. Old Daniel was quite beyond the understanding of any part of the story by this time, and Mrs. Donne knew no more of it than that her neighbour had come in suddenly for a great fortune which ought to have been hers long ago. She was not a mercenary woman, but she made no objection to her daughter’s friendship with Dinah under these circumstances. John had guessed, and as events proved had guessed rightly, that if Dinah visited the old country at all it would be in Ethel’s company. Half his plan was accomplished, and now he had but to bring Ethel

and Joe together to complete his scheme. For, after the manner of impetuous youth, he was persuaded that Ethel could no more fail to recognise the manliness of Joe's character than he had done. If she could but see the man, as he had said to her ! If she could but hear his wishes from his own lips, and see how real and how in earnest he was, she would surely consent to help him. And nobody, I am assured, will be likely to think any the worse of the young man for his generous efforts in behalf of such a cause. Joe by this time had fairly taken John's affections captive, and John was ready to swear by him as the honestest and most injured man in Great Britain. It is a fine thing to be young and to have these impetuous beliefs in human probity. They are often thrown away, but for once they bade fair to be expended on a good object.

When John had once got Ethel so near, he set to work to get her nearer still, but found unlooked-for difficulties in the way. Perhaps she misunderstood the purpose of that persistence with which he dodged her, and suspected

an interest more personal to himself than that which really animated him. But at last, avoid him as she might, he caught her in a corridor of the hotel.

‘Miss Donne,’ he murmured, as she sought to pass him with a mere bow, ‘I have something of the utmost urgency to say to you.’ She could do nothing less than pause, without being downright rude to him. ‘I am most glad you came here, for I think it forwards one of the dearest wishes I have in the world. Joseph Bushell is within five miles of us. Will you see him and judge him for yourself? For Dinah’s sake,’ he pleaded. ‘Think how much hangs upon your judgment: it commits you to nothing. Will you see him?’

Ethel was a woman after all, albeit a very charming one. And being a woman, she could scarcely be insensible to the young fellow’s disinterested earnestness, or to the flattery which so simply told her that the course of two lives depended on her judgment. I do not desire to lay too much stress upon the last. The appeal, ‘For Dinah’s sake,’ might

have been enough to shake down any little barrier of unwillingness. Perhaps, too, she was a trifle curious to see the man.

‘Dinah must not know of it,’ she answered. ‘And I do not see how I can leave her.’

‘If you will give me an hour after she has gone to bed to-night,’ urged John, ‘Mr. Bushell shall be here.’

‘Very well,’ she answered, ‘I will see him.’

John, elated, and supposing all troubles over, made his swiftest way to Mr. Bowker’s cottage, and despatched a messenger to the Buzzard, who returned with Joe. The young fellow found it a somewhat delicate thing to tell him that he was to go and be examined by a lady he had never seen, with a view to ascertain his fitness to be trusted with his own wife. But he blurted it out at last.

‘Miss Donne is very much opposed to you, but I want you to see her yourself.’

Joe assented with a readiness which surprised his companion, but the truth of the matter was that Joe’s heart was growing hun-

grier and hungrier, and his scruples were beginning to be as nothing in his way. He was almost ready at moments to start off and throw himself upon Dinah's mercy without preliminaries. He had written half a ream of letters to her, and destroyed them as he wrote them, one by one.

So when darkness fell, the two went into town together, and Joe stayed at another hotel while John went on to spy out the land before him. Dinah retired early, and John darted away for her husband, brought him up in a cab within five minutes, and led him to the sitting-room where Ethel sat to receive them. It was not a small thing for Joe to enter the house in which his wife was sleeping, even though he were sure of not being discovered by her; to be so near to her, and yet to be sundered from her by the barrier of those six-and-twenty years of absence. He bore the impress of his emotions in his face, and it was natural for a moment he should wish that he had not undertaken the venture.

Ethel rose to John's introduction of the

new-comer, gave him a formal bow and signed him to a seat. The first thing that crossed her was that Dinah would never (in the mere worthless, conventional sense of the word) be a lady, though she had the essentials of ladyhood (which are perhaps, after all, included in womanliness), whilst the man before her had at least the aspect of a gentleman. Even that, in her prejudiced mind, went against him. He would think Dinah's accent vulgar, and despise her homely ways and thoughts.

'I am obliged to you,' said Joe in the simple manly way habitual and natural to him, for having consented to meet me. Mr. Keen tells me that you are very much opposed to me, and I should have expected that. You know the facts of the case up to a certain point, and I need not trouble you by repeating them.'

He paused, and Ethel inclined her head. It was not easy to make way against her resolute coldness ; but he went on.

'If I say anything which gives you pain I can only ask you to forgive me. When my

son and I encountered each other in New York I learned that my wife had never married again, and that my uncle's letter to that effect had held a cruel lie—he didn't know how cruel. Perhaps you know Mr. Bushel's handwriting?' he asked, drawing a book of memoranda from his breast pocket. 'There is his letter. I thought it advisable to bring it.'

Ethel glanced through the letter, which was yellow with age and much worn at the edges of the folds. 'There has been a gaish' (probably gayish) 'wedding here last week, when Dinah Banks was married at the Old Church. I am sorry to hear as you are nott doing well and being busy at this time no more from your affectionate uncle, George Bushell.' So it closed.

'Did you keep this letter, Mr. Bushell, with a view to any such contingency as this?' asked Ethel.

'No,' said Joe, with a simple, sad surprise. 'I never thought at that time of coming back to England. It was years after that before I could have paid the passage-money.'

He folded up the letter, returned it to his pocket-book, and went on.

‘That was the last line I ever had from England. Perhaps that was why I kept it. When my unhappy lad met me in America he was travelling under an assumed name and I didn’t guess who he was. But I resolved on coming back to England in consequence of the news he gave me. When I landed here I scarcely knew what I wanted to do, but I learned from Mr. Keen, here, everything my wife had suffered in my absence. I learned for the first time that I had a son, and I heard what had become of him. I went with Sir Sydney Cheston to the place where he was confined, and I found that he had been released by the intervention of my uncle George.’

This was news to Ethel, and it amazed her, but she said nothing, and gave no sign.

‘Shortly after this my son wrote to Mr. Keen for assistance in discovering Dinah, giving an address at Borton. We went to see him together, and I recognised him as the man who had met me in New York, and had passed

himself off as the brother of my old friend, Sir Sydney Cheston.'

He saw how bitterly all this distressed Ethel, but he was too careful to spare her to apologise, and she bore it bravely. He went on.

'My wife, for her son's sake, has compelled my uncle George to surrender my father's fortune, and she is wealthy. What hold have I upon a son who has already proved himself unworthy of her? Can I leave her, knowing him as I do, to bear the burden he will lay upon her? I have feared that my return might seem a greater evil in her eyes than even that. I have been afraid that after such an absence my return might seem the most terrible thing that could happen to her. Perhaps if the news were broken to her gently, and if she knew that I had no further object than to help her in leading that poor lad to wiser ways, and that I made no demands upon her, and had no wish to fetter her freedom or control her slightest wish—as God knows I haven't!—she might consent to see me once, and let me take

the part I want to take. Will you sound her first, Miss Donne?' he asked hurrying along to hide the shaking of his voice. 'Not letting her guess at first that I am here or alive at all. Can you do that for me? And if my home-coming should seem too hard for her, I must find another way. Will you help me?'

'Mr. Bushell,' said Ethel, breaking her silence for the second time and speaking in a voice unlike her own, 'I value your wife very highly, and I can do nothing to disturb her peace. She has suffered as few women have suffered. If you desire nothing more than you have said——'

'Nothing!' Joe cried earnestly. 'Nothing!'

'I will consent to help you so far as this: I will speak to your wife of a problematical return, and will find out for you whether she would be likely to rejoice or grieve at it, and I will let you know.'

There was a diplomatic movement here which I hope nobody will think sinful. Ethel knew well enough already that there was no

one thing in the world which could so rejoice Dinah's widowed heart as the news of Joe's return. For, when once the secret had been confessed, Dinah's constant speech went back to him, as of one long since dead, indeed, but always to be loved and held in pious memory to the end. But the girl could not yet bring herself to confess as much to the returned exile. Still there was with her, as there had been with John Keen in his first interview with the wanderer, a feeling which warred with her preconceived notions of the man.

‘Will you answer me one or two questions, Mr. Bushell?’ she asked suddenly.

‘If I can,’ he answered.

‘How long was it after your departure from England before you received that letter?’ she asked, pointing to the pocket-book which still lay on the table.

‘Two years,’ said Joe hanging his head and crushing his beard against his breast.

‘What kept you silent all that time?’

‘Shame,’ he answered, lifting his head as he spoke and dropping it again. ‘I promised

to go away and make a home for her. I failed ; I scarcely made a living for myself. I promised to send her the certificate of her marriage, and I couldn't find it. And so I put off writing for a while, and then put it off for a while longer, and at last was afraid to write at all. After a month or two I made sure that she would think me dead, and when uncle George's letter came I was certain that she did so.'

It was a poor excuse, and Ethel thought so. Joe had always thought it shameful, and was not likely to change his opinion now, when the weight of unavailing repentance had been laid upon him so heavily. It was clear that, whatever he had to bear, he had himself made his burden. 'You have made your bed,' says the harsh common-sense proverb, speaking the harsh common-sense of the world: 'lie upon it.' But it is no easier to lie upon it because the briars between the sheets were put there by your own hands. 'Nobody can have any pity for him,' says popular opinion: 'he brought it upon himself.' Nay—still pity him, perhaps the more that he can soften the pangs of suffering by the balm of no forgiveness.

CHAPTER XXXI.

So Joe went his way again and waited. Conveyancer Packmore and John Keen were in conference for a few hours with Dinah, and except for some merest formalities of law, the like of which any able young lawyer might readily invent if he desired it, the property of long errant Joe was at last in his wife's hands. John had his reasons for delay. There was surely a method of keeping Dinah in Joe's neighbourhood, since there was no method of getting Joe to keep in Dinah's. The young fellow consulted Sir Sydney Cheston, and found the Baronet inclined to adopt impetuous action.

'A man might think,' said Sir Sydney, 'that the whole business was being carried out on the story-book principle, with an absolute necessity for filling three volumes out of it. The man wants to go back to his wife. There's no mortal doubt that she would be most happy

to have him back. *We* want to see the whole thing settled and done with, and two good people happy; and yet we all go philandering about in this ridiculous and uncertain way. Let's bring 'em together, say who's who, and have done with it. They'd settle matters in five minutes, and their friends could go home and dine in peace.'

'I wish with all my heart it could be done,' said John. 'Shall we make a final representation to Mr. Bushell, and try to persuade him to some definite action? He is waiting now, though, to hear what Miss Donne says.'

'My dear fellow,' cried Cheston, 'it doesn't matter what Miss Donne says. Bushell *must* be on the spot to control that rascal of a son of his—infernally unlucky that he should be such a rascal, isn't it?—and it's Quixotic to talk about leaving a fortune such as his behind him. Why, that young blackguard would break his mother's heart and be off with the money in a year. In short,' said Cheston decisively, 'if Joe won't move, I'll tell his wife he's here, and bring her over to him.'

But John, who naturally attached great weight to Ethel's desires in the matter, though he dissented from her estimate of Joe, fought against this rough-and-ready method. He advanced Joe's own expressed desire to remain unknown; he represented how they had both pledged their honour not to reveal his secret; and, in brief, he left the Baronet convinced, and out of temper, as men convinced against their will are apt to be.

Before this, by some means or other, the story of the late transfer of old Joe's property to his lost son's wife was in everybody's mouth. Whether Mrs. Bullus had listened, or Conveyancer Packmore had leaked, which seems improbable, or Cheston had been indiscreet, nobody seemed to know; but the secret was no secret, and the hidden marriage of so long ago was common talk. But there was no hint of old George's criminality in the gossip, nor of Dinah's real relationship to young George; though, by the way, it was settled once by a learned legal tribunal, according to Lawrence Sterne, I fancy, that a mother and her son are

not related to each other. Dinah knew that her business was known, and shrank within herself and longed to get away. The local papers had paragraphs and 'leaderettes' about it, exalting that magnanimous morality on old George's part which forbade him from fighting the case.

'I suppose,' said the Baronet, still a little out of humour, 'that there can't be any objection to my calling on Miss Donne? I might see Mrs. Bushell, and I might learn if anything had been done.'

'Pray be discreet,' said John.

'I'll be discreet enough,' Cheston answered brusquely. 'But somebody must move in the matter, and if nobody else will, I will.'

'Miss Donne may not yet have had time to carry out her promise,' urged John.

'Then she'll have to find time,' said the other, not being in love with the young lady, 'and do it pretty quickly.'

Sir Sydney Cheston got into his carriage instead of the usual dog-cart, lit his meer-schaum, and drove, unattended, as was his wont,

to the hotel in which Dinah and Miss Donne were quartered. This lonely drive, which lasted an hour, gave the noisy, good-hearted gentleman a chance to think, and he was no sooner arrived than he put his thoughts into practice.

‘They’ll say all manner of things,’ said he to himself. ‘They’ll say I want to marry a publican’s daughter because she’s got a quarter of a million of money; and a very good reason that would be if I wanted to do it. They’ll find out all on a sudden that they always noticed a tendency in me to make friends with moneyed people. I always worshipped the mammon of unrighteousness, they’ll say at Wesley Chapel. Let ’em say what they like. A good conscience, Syd, my boy! Eh?’

He sent in his card and was received, and fell to talking with Miss Donne in his own boisterous way, and suddenly blurted out an invitation to Worley Hall, which took both women by surprise. They declined with thanks, looking at each other, but the refusal was feeble. Sir Sydney was a baronet and

very much looked up to in those parts, and they had both been inclined to regard him as a man who had his own way in all things ; and, indeed, he had in most.

‘ My sister will take care of you both, and you know, Miss Banks—beg your pardon—very ridiculous, Mrs. Bushell, for I was just going to speak of your husband ; poor Joe was my dearest chum once upon a time ; and, in short, ladies, I am here with a purpose, and I’m not in a humour to take a refusal, and I shall be more hurt than I can say if I meet one.’

He actually took things into his own hands ; rang the bell, demanded the manager, informed him that the ladies were going to stay with him at Worley Hall, and instructed him to send their belongings after them. He lunched with them by his own invitation, and carried them triumphantly away with him, having prepared his sister by a telegraphic message. They had no more power against him than they might have against a whirlwind, and they submitted with inward tremors.

‘You see, Miss Donne,’ said Cheston at his earliest opportunity, ‘that the people about here are saying all manner of unworthy things about your friend, Mrs. Bushell. Now, let me hear ’em saying anything about a guest of mine!’

Errant Joe’s wife, lifted suddenly into fame, was naturally found no better than she should be. Curious, how impossible it is to have one’s name public property and escape lies.

Ethel shrewdly suspected his real purpose, but dared not say so. She began to see that she was not to have her own way without interruption, or at least began to guess as much, and she trembled anew for Dinah, yet could say nothing to prepare her. Both the younger and the elder woman were ill at ease in their new quarters, though for diverse reasons. Dinah was oppressed by the majesty of the place, and found no joy at being waited on at dinner by liveried menials, who brought her strange dishes. Sir Sydney’s maiden sister was kind and curious, but Dinah had no heart to talk of her own affairs to anybody but Ethel. Elderly Miss Cheston pronounced enthusiastically upon

Miss Donne, whom she had always admired, though hitherto chiefly at a distance.

‘Not at all countryfied,’ said Miss Cheston to her brother; not rustic in the least. Quite a lady. No *mauvaise honte* about her.’

To this Sir Sydney agreed with a pre-occupied air, being engaged with the ripening of his own benevolent plans. His sister, who was perforce acquainted with them, thought it all deliciously romantic, and waited for the *dénouement* with much anxiety.

‘You’ll keep a still tongue till it’s all over, Dorothea,’ said Sir Sydney.

‘My dear Sydney,’ said the maiden sister, ‘can you doubt me?’

Cheston made no answer to this appeal, but went back to his plotting.

At that moment Ethel and Dinah were closeted together, and the younger woman, fancying that she saw the inevitable coming, led the talk to the topic the widowed wife most loved. Dinah told the old story over again: how tried Joe had been, and how valiantly he had gone away, and how he had never again been heard

of. A few tears fell, but the story was ancient now.

‘It’s very strange to think of, Dinah’, said Ethel, steeling herself. ‘If he were alive and you were to meet, you might not know each other.’

Dinah disbelieved. She saw the fresh-coloured youngster in the garments of six-and-twenty years ago, his long hair worn in the fashion of that bygone day, the callow bit of whisker on his cheek, his clear front, his blue eyes. Time made no difference to him. She would know him, yes, amongst ten thousand! She said so as she wiped her eyes, and took up her lacework again.

‘He would be changed,’ persisted Ethel. ‘We all change in less than six-and-twenty years, dear. If he were still alive, and if you saw him, you would not know him. If you and I parted to-day and met no more for all that time, do you think you would know me? I should be an old woman.’

Dinah shook her head with a mild showery smile.

‘A woman doesn’t forget her husband, my dear,’ she answered. ‘No, no. And the father of her child and all. You don’t know what it is, my darlin’.’

‘I wonder how it would feel, Dinah,’ said Ethel, ‘if one were married, and one’s husband went away and came back again after so long an absence.’

‘Why, what makes you talk of that?’ cried Dinah.

‘I was always fanciful,’ answered Ethel. ‘But don’t you think it would be terrible rather than happy, after such a time?’

‘No,’ said Dinah. ‘Not if he was to come back cold from his grave, poor thing. Do you think anything could make Joe terrible to me, my dear? I’ve laid awake many an’ many a time, prayin’ to see his poor ghost, if it wasn’t wicked to ask such a thing. You’ll think me a foolish woman perhaps, my dear,’ continued Dinah with a smile more tearful than before, ‘but if I knowed he’d stay away o’ purpose, an’ was alive now anywhere, I’d march there bare-foot an’ ask him to let me see him now an’ then.

I think it's God as puts such feelings in a woman's heart when she marries a man and has childern by him. I don't think anybody else has such thoughts.'

'Dinah,' cried Ethel, throwing her arms about her friend's neck, 'you are the best woman in the world.'

'No, my dear,' answered Dinah, kissing her. 'If you marry and have children, you'll know what I mean.'

There was surely no need to probe Dinah's heart further than this, and it was only too clear that when errant Joe came back again his wife would have forgiveness and a welcome for him. But—Ethel vowed inwardly and with a grand flush of anticipatory wrath—when the man came back and misbehaved himself, he should repent any suffering he might bring to Dinah. He should suffer in return, and should be ashamed of himself, if any possibility of shame lay in him.

It was night-time when this conversation was begun, and it was late when the talk to which it led was over. Dinah dreamed of Joe

that night, and saw him as he used to be, and at the close of the dream she awoke.

‘Not know you, my life’s darlin’!’ she cried to herself, reaching out her arms in the darkness. ‘Always yours, Joe; always yours!’

And so, with no guess that the life-long truant was so near, she wept herself back to her dreams again. Sleep, faithful lover—sleep, and dream happily! Live a little while in the past, and be glad in it!

Early in the morning, Cheston, with his brown beard blowing back in the free air and his shoulders squared resolutely, turned the slashing bay mare in the direction of the Buzzard, and made good speed to Mr. Bowker’s cottage. Joe was at the mine, and the Baronet, leaving his horse in the care of Mr. Bowker’s eldest son, walked off to find him. Seeing him at the pit’s mouth in company with one or two miners, he called him and led the way into the offices.

‘I suppose,’ he said with a laugh, ‘that now this business is over you’ve no desire to keep on mining. Eh?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Joe a little drearily, ‘it’s interesting work, rather.’

‘Pooh!’ said the Baronet. ‘I’ve come over to take you back with me. You’ve had enough of this. The reason for which you came here exists no longer.’

‘Cheston!’ said Joe, paling somewhat as he spoke. ‘You mean well, but you mustn’t trap me. I know who is staying at Worley Hall with you!’

‘The deuce you do!’ cried Cheston, his countenance falling.

‘Young Keen went over to see her last night,’ said Joe, ‘and they told him at the hotel where they had gone to. No, Cheston, let things take their course for a while, and give me time to think.’

‘Now, look here, Joe,’ said Cheston, laying both hands on his old chum’s shoulders and shaking him to and fro a little, ‘there’s something in the Bible about the kisses of an enemy being deceitful, and the wounds of a friend faithful. It’s a true word, if ever one was written. How about that lad of yours? Are you going

to let him play the devil with his mother's heart and your fortune, or are you going to step forward like a man, and say, "Here am I, Joe Bushell, come to life again, and going to try to do my duty, and keep things square!" Now, which is it to be, Joe? Tell me.'

'I have a present hold upon the lad, Cheston,' urged Joe. 'I have told him that if he misbehaves himself I won't stand by and see it. I could go in and stop any extravagances of his with a word.'

'Listen to me, now,' cried the Baronet grimly. 'If Mahomet won't come to the mountain, the mountain will have to travel to Mahomet. If you won't come to your wife, your wife shall come to you.'

'Have a little patience with me,' said Joe. 'I don't want to distress her. Let me hear what Miss Donne says before we do anything.'

'Hang Miss Donne!' said Cheston ungalantly. 'No,' he added laughing, 'don't hang Miss Donne. She is a very charming young woman, and a good one, or I'm no judge of

characters. But now—will you come? Yes or no?’

‘Not until I know that my coming mayn’t be a downright horror to her, Cheston. Not until she’s prepared a little——’

‘And half dies of expecting you before she sees you,’ interjected Cheston, laying his hands on Joe’s shoulders again, and once more rocking him to and fro. ‘The wounds of a friend are faithful. Remember that, if I hurt you, old man. You’re the same irresolute Joe Bushell as of old. The same irresolute Joe Bushell who couldn’t find it in his heart to confess that he was married—the same Joe who meant every day to write to his wife confessing his failure to find a home for her, and always put off the writing till he never wrote at all. Not a bad Joe Bushell, not by any means; an honest fellow, with a good heart, but irresolute, irresolute, irresolute.’

‘Yes, Cheston,’ answered Joe; ‘but not irresolute now, if I know my heart at all. I’m slow in finding where duty lies. The way’s perplexed. I want to go back, Cheston. I

want to make up, if I only could, for a little of what she's suffered. But I must think of her, and think of her only.'

'Well, Joe,' returned Cheston, gripping him more warmly still by the shoulders, as Joe stood with bent head to hide the tears that dripped slowly through his beard to the earthen floor, 'you must let your friends act as mediaries, and hasten things a little. That's all. I won't press you for the present. Good-bye, old man, and keep a good heart. You'll be together, and be happy yet, the pair of you, I hope and trust. She's a dear woman, Joe—a dear good woman !'

'Yes,' said Joe ; 'I know it.'

Cheston shook him by the shoulders once again, and left him there. As he marched towards his dog-cart he muttered a great oath to his beard.

'I'll bring that foolish fellow and his wife together before the sun goes down.'

He filled his meerschaum, stepped into Mr. Bowker's cottage for a light, charming Mrs. Bowker's heart with noisy affabilities, threw

half-a-crown to Bowker the younger, mounted the dog-cart, touched up the slashing mare, and drove away. The first thing he did on reaching home was to find his sister. He threw himself into a chair and faced her with an air of gloomy determination.

‘What is the matter, Sydney?’ cried the elderly spinster.

‘You’ll keep your mouth shut, Dorothea, about what I’m going to tell you?’ he demanded.

‘Really, Sydney,’ she declared, ‘you grow quite horrid. What a dreadful phrase! What is it?’

‘Promise!’ he asked, and she promised. ‘That fellow won’t come!’

‘Dear me!’ said Miss Cheston; ‘I thought he was so eager to be reconciled to his wife.’

‘So he is, but he’s got some maggot in his head about her having learned to hate him during his absence, and about the shock of his return being terrible to her. You know where he is? Very well. Did you ever go down a coal mine?’

‘What a question! You know I never did.’

‘Well, don’t you think it rather an odd thing that a lady living all her life in this part of the country has never been down a coal mine? Don’t you *want* to go down a coal mine?’

‘Certainly not,’ replied the lady.

‘Not if you could persuade Miss Donne and Mrs. Bushell to want to go down a coal mine too? Not if we went to the Buzzard, and in place of going down I just walked into the offices with Mrs. Bushell and said, “Excuse me, madam, but this is your husband. Fight it out between you!”’

‘Wouldn’t that be too sudden, Sydney?’

‘Won’t the news be sudden whenever it comes?’ her brother asked. ‘Now, will you help me? Will you want to go down a coal mine when we’re at luncheon, and persuade the others to come with us?’

‘Oh,’ said the spinster, ‘you begin it, Sydney.’

‘Very well,’ said the Baronet. ‘I’ll begin

it. Back me up, and we'll have this mournful business over, and take to piping and gaiety again.'

So, being foiled on one side, the obstinate Baronet made this new approach, and opened his batteries at luncheon.

'Dorothea,' he began, 'I don't believe you've ever been down a coal mine.'

'I never have,' responded Dorothea; adding untruthfully, but according to programme, 'I should like it of all things.'

'Have you ever been down a coal mine, Mrs. Bushell? No? Nor you Miss Donne? How singular! What do you say, Dorothea? If your guests would like to go, I'm thinking of going down my new mine, the Buzzard, this afternoon. It's quite clean, and perfectly safe.'

The deceitful Dorothea, animated by the best intentions, quite sparkled with delight over the prospect. The spirit of adventure and daring awoke in Ethel's heart, and *she* would like to go of all things. Dinah turned a little pale at the idea, and shook her head, but, being of a yielding nature, was overruled, and consented.

She would like it very much she said, only—she was a little timid. But she would be glad to see what a mine was like, if Sir Sydney Cheston was sure there was no danger.

‘I shall lead you into no danger, Mrs. Bushell,’ cried Sir Sydney jovially. ‘Have no fear.’

So the thing being settled, the women retired after luncheon to put on their plainest and least spoilable clothes, and when they were dressed Sir Sydney led the way to the carriage and drove off with them, bearing in his heart a resolution the like of which would not be unbecoming in the leader of a storming party. Dorothea was fluttering, as any middle-aged tender-hearted maiden lady would have a right to flutter under such circumstances as she found herself in. Ethel, for the first time for many a long week, was gay at heart again. The sense of adventure, for there was just a spice of danger about her thoughts of the expedition, brightened and revived her, acting like a spiritual tonic of a strongish sort. Dinah, innocent motive-power of the whole movement,

was somewhat nervous, but would not show it. The road on which they travelled had for her the memories it had for Joe a few weeks earlier, and the young figure with the long light hair worn in the fashion of 1850, and the blue eyes and the callow bit of sprouting whisker, went with her all the way. They passed the Saracen (she had dropped her veil a mile before), and she saw it changed and unlike itself. The new face it wore chilled her, curiously.

The genial and noisy Baronet was so obviously changed by the way that Ethel began to suspect him. But she could say nothing and do nothing, and her suspicion, after all, was only a vague fear, and had no ground to go upon.

The carriage turned by-and-by into the lumpy lane, and there Dinah, who sat behind, sighted John Keen talking with a bearded stiff-set stranger whose face was partly turned away. John caught sight of her at the same time, and the bearded stranger stepped through a gap in the hedge and disappeared. Sir Sydney Cheston used evil language, inwardly, and lashed

his horses so that they sprang, and elicited a squeak of fright from Miss Dorothea. For the vanished figure was Joe Bushell's, and a word of John's, as Sir Sidney guessed, had set him off.

'Hillo, Keen!' cried Cheston, jerking his horses up viciously, 'who was that you were talking to?'

'Your manager at the Buzzard, Sir Sydney,' John responded, refusing to be drawn into the Baronet's plot, and indeed in his own mind gravely disallowing it all merit.

'Where's he gone to?' growled the Baronet angrily. 'Can't you get him to come back, Keen? Follow him, there's a good fellow.'

John obeyed, but after a ten minutes' absence rejoined Sir Sydney at the mouth of the mine. He took him aside.

'It's of no use, Sir Sydney. He will not startle her. He is afraid of shocking her—really afraid. Do him justice. Try to bring it about in a quieter way.'

'Hang it all,' Cheston grumbled, heartily savage at his failure. 'I've brought 'em all

here on a fool's errand, pretending to take 'em down the mine. Confound the mine !'

' Well,' said John bluntly, ' that's better than bringing them with no reason at all, sir. Take them down, Sir Sydney, and then take them home again, and let us be content to wait a little. Your friend will yield, if not to your pressure, to the persuasion of his own heart, by-and-by.'

' Dorothea,' called Cheston, ' come here.' His sister obeyed his summons. ' That fellow's seen us and bolted,' he said bitterly ; ' and now I shall either have to confess that I've brought you on a fool's errand, or you'll *have* to go down, though I don't think you're very hungry for it.'

' I don't want to go, Sydney,' said Miss Dorothea.

' Well, stop where you are,' said Cheston with brotherly brutality. ' I'm not going to look like a fool, in addition to being one. I shall go down, and take Miss Donne and Mrs. Bushell with me.'

' Can I be of use ?' cried John. In the

exercise of that double-barrelled profession of his, John had surveyed the Buzzard, and knew his depths as well as any man alive. He said as much, being eager to attach himself to Miss Donne's party and Miss Donne.

‘ You'll spoil your broadcloth,’ said the Baronet.

‘ Oh,’ said John, ‘ I'll borrow a jacket and a cap ;’ and with that he ran off, returning a minute later in an unbrimmed felt hat for all the world like a great basin inverted, and a new jacket of white flannel lined with carpeting of a brilliant pattern. Ethel turned away to laugh at him in private, and John was delighted to see her sparkling once again, even at his own expense.

Mr. Bowker was on the bank-side, and came down to make the necessary preparations. It is the custom in that part of the world not to use a cage but an open skip to descend in. The skip is a mere square of boards, suspended from the chain which lowers it by a big inverted letter U of iron. When the womenfolk saw this doubtful means of descent and the yawn-

ing cavernous black of the mine below it, a tremor ran through them.

‘All right, ladies,’ said Mr. Bowker, observing this. ‘Do’t yo’ be afeard. I’ll fix the lot on you as right as a trivet.’

A sort of sliding door being pushed across the mouth of the mine, the skip was lowered and allowed to rest upon it. The ladies with renewed tremors stepped forward and took their places, Cheston and Keen accompanying without tremors, the Baronet still sulky from the disappointment he had suffered, the young lawyer quite beaming at the splendid treat fortune had thrown into his way. Miss Cheston, Ethel, and Dinah were provided with chains, which being passed securely round the waist and firmly attached to the inverted iron U, seemed at least to do away with all danger of falling off. Cheston and John stood at opposite corners of the square.

‘Ready?’ cried coaly Mr. Bowker.

‘Wait a bit,’ cried the Baronet in answer. ‘Run up to the “Dudley” while we’re down and order half-a-dozen of champagne. We

shall want a glass of wine when we come up. Eh, ladies? Now we're ready.'

Coaly William gave the signal. The skip was hoisted, with a general inclination on the part of the feminine contingent to squeal and hold on with ridiculous tightness—the latter impulse obeyed, the former resisted. Then, at a vigorous push of coaly William's foot, away went the sliding door, the black chasm yawned, and the skip dropped like a stone, with a motion so smooth and unshaken that the gleaming walls on either side seemed to shoot up past it, and the travellers themselves to hang stock still. In a while the walls began to mount less quickly, then softly ceased to mount at all, and the ladies were aware of a black cavern with an immense fire on the floor of it. John was off first, and assisted in unbinding Miss Donne and helping her down to firm earth. Happy John! full of knowledge and able to answer all inquiries. Inquiries came in on all sides as to what was this and that and the other, and John was concisely fluent in reply, conscious that he sounded

businesslike and manly in his goddess's ears. Further into the bowels of the earth—the heat sweltering—Miss Dorothea's maiden susceptibilities shocked by the sight of coaly males, who lay or knelt pecking at the coal, naked to the waist, in gloomy side avenues. By-and-by the way began to be damp, began to be damper, began to run in a little stream an inch deep.

‘Place used to be as dry as a chip, Sir Sydney,’ said John.

‘I’ve always heard so,’ answered the Baronet with unwonted ill-humour in his tones. ‘Why the dickens couldn’t somebody have told us the place was in this state? The ladies will catch their death.’

‘Oh dear no,’ protested the ladies, interested now, and their fears vanishing.

Water two inches deep, and deepening apparently—ladies hesitating—Sir Sydney refusing under the circumstances to go a step farther.

‘It’s quite dry yonder,’ said John, pointing a few yards ahead. ‘They’ve come upon a spring here, I suppose.’

‘Here,’ meant a side-working to the right, where, as a few farther steps made manifest, a solitary personage sat pecking at the wall, pipe in mouth, and working by a naked candle.

‘Hillo, my man,’ cried John, ‘where’s your lamp?’

‘Oi lint um, sorr,’ said the solitary personage in accents sufficiently Milesian, and went on pecking.

He sat upon a lump of coal in the middle of a space as high and twice as wide as an ordinary room door, and the water ran between his outspread feet and round his improvised stool like a bubbling brooklet.

‘Where’s all that water coming from?’ asked John.

‘Here,’ answered Paddy, with an unusually decisive blow of his pick.

As if he had struck another rock such as that which Moses touched in the wilderness, the water, as he drew away the pick point, sprang out in a stream as thick as a man’s thumb, and spirted three or four yards.

‘Stop that!’ cried John, almost wildly.
‘Come out. Do you hear?’

The man heard, but he struck the face of coal again, and this time the water spouted out thick as a man’s arm.

‘You madman!’ John yelled, and, turning, he seized Ethel by the waist, and fairly lifted her, and rushed up the steep incline of the dry floor bearing her in his arms. As he ran, he turned and shouted, ‘This way for your lives!’

The women rushed towards him terror-stricken, not knowing why. But John’s eyes had seen the whole surface of the wall in that side avenue quiver, and he knew the ground of his own fears. Before they could ask a question, before he had even set Ethel fairly on her feet, the wall, now twenty yards below them, broke, and with a swishing sweep and a roar the imprisoned waters leapt sheer against the further wall, and poured up and down the main pathway of the mine.

‘Run!’ shouted John. ‘This way!’

He snatched his precious burden to his arms

again, and tore uphill. The mounting water had him to the waist; Cheston, with one arm round Dinah and another round his sister, came up behind. It was well for both men in that desperate race for life and death that they were strong and fleet, and well for all that one of them knew the place so thoroughly.

The water ceased to pursue them, and ebbed from waist to knee and from knee to ankle until again they stood upon dry ground. There were Davy lamps twinkling on the wall at either side where they paused, and they could see the water pouring back again to find the lower levels after its first wild rush.

‘What does this mean?’ cried the Baronet panting.

‘There was an old working on the north,’ John answered with sobbing breath, as he set his burden down, ‘an old abandoned working disused this eighty years. It must have filled with water and that poor wretch broke into it.’

‘Can we get back when the rush is over?’

‘No,’ said John, staring at the water twenty yards away, now heaving sullenly, but no

longer ebbing. ‘At this point we stand fifty feet above the level of the bottom of the shaft. There are fifty feet of water in the shaft therefore. We are prisoners for a day or two.’

Miss Dorothea clasped her hands and fainted, and the others looked upon each other in the thick dusk with awful faces.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ABOVE, spring sunshine and the world unconscious (even the local world as yet unconscious) of disaster ; below, terror and wide-spread death.

Joe Bushell, with mingled emotions, had betaken himself to the great Midland capital and there wandered desolate about the streets, cigar in mouth, staring in at shop windows. It was not a manly-looking part to play, this dodging and evading of a woman who had loved him, and to whom he had solemnly sworn in the hearing of God and man to be faithful. It seemed certain that Dinah would misconstrue it if she heard of it, and would set it down to his own blackguard and dastardly fear of meeting her. Better end it all and let her know that he was still in the flesh and waiting for her forgiveness or her scorn, as it might be, and at least

desiring nothing but her happiness. He prayed for guidance, poor Joe, as he wandered lonely, elbowed out of the way of busy men, and staring vacantly into shop windows ; and at last it seemed as if a voice of guidance came. He turned into an hotel, demanded a private room and writing materials, and painfully and slowly indited a letter to Miss Donne, beseeching her to prepare Dinah carefully for the news, and finally to show that letter to her. He set down all his desires—his wish to leave Dinah in perfect freedom if she chose it so ; his wish to help her in the government of their erring son ; his wish that the fortune she had become possessed of should remain exclusively her own ; his content to do whatever she desired. He set down also in plain uncompromising words the story of his own base neglect of his promises, and offered no extenuation for it. He begged pardon humbly for the past, and he protested, in words that moved him as he set them down, his single and entire devotion to her will from that time forward.

The writing of this letter was a long and

painful business, and it was more than dusk when he paced into the street with it, and dropped it, feeling as if he dropped his heart with it, into the gaping little mouth of zinc at the general post-office. He had addressed it to Miss Donne, care of Sir Sydney Cheston, Worley Hall, Staffordshire, and as he walked the streets he speculated on the time of its arrival, and wished it there, and wished it recalled, or written otherwise, as you may fancy of him.

The streets were all alive with gaslight, and the people were pushing by him to the theatre, when a dirty little fellow, fluttering a sheaf of news sheets, came dancing by, piping, 'Awful mining disaster. A hundred miners imprisoned.' Then, as the lad danced along, Joe heard his shrill tones sound the name of 'Sir Sydney Cheston.' With a horrible foreboding in his heart he dashed after the lad, thrust a shilling into one hand, snatched a paper from the other, and with the damp sheet shaking in his fingers, he pushed to a shop window and read the news. He read through it almost at a glance, and his

heart fairly sickened within him. 'Sir Sydney Cheston,' so ran one paragraph of the curt telegraph message, 'was accompanied by his only sister and by Mrs. Bushell and Miss Donne, guests at Worley Hall, with whom the unfortunate Baronet was on a visit of pleasure to the mine.'

He stood a minute, understanding well enough, but numbed and incapable of action. Then, a cab passing, he hailed it, and leapt in, and gave the man directions.

'An extra pound,' he cried, 'if you're there under the half-hour. Drive your hardest.'

The cabman had heard the news—it was all over the district and in type in London news offices by this time—and half to win his pound and half because he had caught something of that amazing flash which passes from man to man sometimes, he flogged his horse along at a furious speed, and once on the level, unobstructed country road, put him fairly at a gallop, and kept him at it, until the blazing, smoky cressets round the Buzzard's mouth came into sight, revealing a sea of faces, and the horse

began to stumble dangerously in the uneven lane. Joe thrust a couple of sovereigns into the driver's hand, and dashed from the cab, fighting his way like a madman through the crowd. Men and women at the sight of his face made way for him, and called for others to make way.

‘Mek way theer,’ cried the hoarse Black Country voices, ‘cossent see the mon’s got somebody DOWN?’

When once that cry began the crowd parted for him and made way.

Bowker was at the mouth of the mine, his face pale below its coal-dust, and his lips set firmly. He was ordering here and there, quietly and with self-possession.

‘Your wife’s down, Master Joseph,’ he said when Joe laid a hand upon his arm. They had talked of Dinah many times since the coaly little man had pierced the disguise of Joe’s alias. ‘And the gaffer, an’ his sister, an’ young Keen, an’ Miss Donne, as used to belong to Quarrymoor. Hode up, an’ be a mon, Master Joseph. There’s a lad o’ mine down, too.’

‘What are you doing?’ asked Joe with forced calmness.

‘I sent for the fire-engines to help pump,’ said William, ‘but the hose ain’t long enough, not to come near the water.’

‘I’ll wire to Birmingham, London, anywhere, for every foot that can be had for money,’ said Joe.

‘Right!’ cried William. ‘Yo’ can leave me here. I’ll leave no stone unturned.’

Joe was off again, the crowd once more dividing for him. The cabman was still where he had left him, breathing his horse. Joe mounted again and was driven to the local fire office, then, having made inquiries, to the telegraph office, whence in a minute or two were despatched winged messages for succour here and there. Next he raced back to the scene of the disaster, there only to stand still and taste the horrible nausea of waiting, whilst the engines clanked, and the vast pumping bucket dropped like a stone, or came up (with every inch of steel rope that bore it vibrating

like a living conscious nerve) to vomit its hundreds of gallons, and, stonelike, fall again.

It was in his mind all the while that his coming back had led Dinah here. It was in his mind that the letter of that afternoon was too late written. A day earlier it would have saved her.

There was nothing to be done but wait. The huge bucket went up and down, the engineman drove his fiery steel as he had never driven it before.

‘What depth of water, William?’ asked Joe with desperate quiet.

‘Fifty-two feet, we reckon,’ returned William.

‘What area does it cover?’

‘Young Wilki’son the surveyor’s i’ the office wi’ the plans,’ answered William. ‘He’s mekin’ his calculations. We shall know directly.’

In a while the surveyor came with his report: so many thousand cubic feet of water in the mine, so many hundred feet being lifted by the means at present at disposal. Result—

irrefragable and terrible—two hundred and thirty-two hours' work before them, and by that time hope all over.

No. There came answering messages from London, from Birmingham, from Manchester. Hose of specified size with brass screws and jointings as indicated, on the way, enough to serve half-a-dozen engines.

'I am sorry to tell you, sir,' says a grave man (manager of a great neighbouring factory), speaking sorrowfully when Joe had read out the last of these telegrams to William, 'that fire-engines will be of no service.'

'No service?' cried Joe, horror-stricken. 'Why not?'

'How are the pumps to suck water at such a distance?'

This query fell like a blow on all who heard it.

'You must fill your hose with water to make it draw, and to fill it you would have to fill the mine. Every spot you pour in would run through.'

Horrible, but convincing. Nature has but

one set of laws for all sets of human circumstances. The man who had dealt this blow had turned sadly to leave the place, when Joe seized him by the arm.

‘Stop.’ He half thought he knew him.
‘You are an engineer?’

‘Yes. A bit of one.’

‘Come with me to the offices, and for Heaven’s sake tell me if there’s anything in a scheme I have.’

They pushed through the crowd in silence, and once within the office, Joe, with a trembling hand, drew a pencil from his pocket, and taking a sheet of paper, made two parallel perpendicular lines upon it.

‘Take that,’ he said, ‘as representing the hose.’

‘Yes,’ said the other nodding.

Joe drew a line across the other two in the middle and one at the base.

‘Take this as representing the water-line, and this the bottom of the shaft.’

‘Yes,’ said the manager again.

‘Take this as representing a brass case,’

continued Joe, scoring two lines across the bottom of the imaginary hose. 'Suppose the case fixed firmly by a screw. Suppose it filled with gunpowder enough to blast it—an electric wire attached—the whole thing lowered—the tube filled with water—the pumps ready——'

'There's something in that, maybe,' said the manager with Scotch caution. 'But, ah 'm as ignorant of hydraulics as a baby. Anyway, we'll test it. Come away wi' me this minute.'

So for one hour at least there was something else to do than wait. The two men rushed together to the great factory where the Scotchman held command, and the manager's hands drew the plans for the powder case, hands of skilled artisans were set to work at it, hammers rang on anvil, and red sparks flew, and the thing was done with incredible rapidity and deftness.

'We shall want more than one,' said Joe; 'how many engines can we get?'

'One steam, three or four manuals,' responded the manager. 'Mon,' he added, 'you've a head on you.'

‘My wife’s in the mine,’ said Joe, as if that explained it all.

‘Ay, ay,’ said the Scotchman quietly. ‘Make five or six o’ they things,’ he added to his foreman, ‘and get water-tight wrappings for them all. I’ll take this with me. Send a man to the High Street for the fire-engine, an’ if they say it’s of no service, tell them they’re mightily mistaken, an’ we’ll make it of service. And now, sir, to wire for every fire-engine we can get.’

Messengers who had waited at railway stations for the expected hose, came with it lumbering in waggons in the dead of night. Crowds of men harnessed to great ropes dragged at manual engines in the dead of night along the lumpy lane, and haled them to the pit’s mouth. Deft mechanics, despatched from the great capital of ingenious industry close by, set up their electric machine, uncoiled their wire, and fixed their insulators. The vast crowd (ten thousand people gathered there, and lingering an hour after midnight to watch if this new hope availed anything) pressed round in

close serried phalanx till all was ready. A score of brawny hands were on the pump-shafts—the tube was lowered and filled—the wire gone with it—the finger of a deft artisan pressed the little ivory button that awoke the spark.

‘Pump!’ roared the engineer, and up and down went the pump-shafts, swift and steady.

‘Does it draw?’ from lip to lip. ‘For God’s sake, does it draw?’

‘It draws! Hurrah! It draws!’

The crowd cheered wildly, but in a second or two the clank of the pump-shafts ceased, and an ominous silence spread about from the shaft of the mine, as though it radiated from a centre. The ignorant experiment had failed, as it was bound to do. Nature has but one set of laws for all sets of human circumstances, no hopes can touch her or despairs move her.

Joe and Bowker, each with his hands clenched on the pumping-shaft, stared across the body of the engine at each other in mute despair. The far-off outer circles of the crowd were still cheering, when, by one consent, the

volunteer workers let fall their hands and turned away. The scattered cheers died off, and there was dead silence, and then a murmur, and the news of the failure went through the crowd and silence fell again. Joe sat down upon a great coil of the useless tubing with hanging head and useless hands depending between his knees. The Scotch manager tapped him on the shoulder.

‘We had better be doing something than nothing,’ he said quietly. ‘Heaven alone knows how long it will take to do it, but we must just try to dig them out from the workings of the old Bowler, yonder.’

Joe made no answer, until the Scotchman seized and shook him by the shoulder.

‘No giving way man,’ he urged, ‘whilst there’s even a bit of a chance left.’

‘Not while there’s a chance,’ said Joe, like a man in a dream.

The Scotchman, passing an arm through his, led him to the offices of the mine, where sat the young surveyor, poring over the plans.

‘Where’s the nearest point,’ asked the factory manager, ‘between the Buzzard and the old Bowler?’

‘Here,’ answered the other, laying a finger on the plan before him.

‘Ay,’ said the Scotchman, bending down, ‘and what’s the distance?’

‘Sixty yards,’ said the surveyor, laying a little rule across the plan, and checking his calculation.

The engineer shook his head.

‘There’s small hope of getting through that in time.’

‘None whatever,’ said the other, and rising, folded up the plan and laid it by.

The three stood quite silent for a minute, when the engineer, with a swift gesture, took the other by the arm.

‘Who dialled the old Bowler?’ he demanded.

‘I did.’

‘And young Keen,’ said the engineer, ‘dialled the Buzzard. Now tell me one thing on your soul.’ He seized the plan and opened

it with nervous haste. 'Did you ever allow for the variation of the needle?'

The other looked at him doubtfully, as not understanding.

'No,' he said.

'Do you know what I am talking about?' cried the Scotchman.

'No,' said the other again.

'Then there's a chance. Young Keen and I had a talk about that very matter years ago, and he told me he always made strict allowance for that same variation. Now, if that be so, the plan lies, and the two workings are nearer each other than anybody guesses. The Buzzard working keeps straight on, and the Bowler, running by the right of it, has always got a tendency towards the right, and that gives us a start of God knows how many yards. We must get at them through the Bowler. It's Sir Sydney's own mine, and if it wasn't there'd be no man such a villain as to throw an obstacle in the way of work like this. Come away with me this minute.'

At the mere prospect of work to do, Joe

rose with a new look on his face, and the three men left the offices at a run, the Scotchman leading.

‘I want volunteers,’ cried Joe wildly, and in answer to the cry the whole crowd swayed round him.

‘Steady,’ said the engineer. ‘Working miners only. We can do with no others.’ And from his knowledge of the men he began to call out a list of names of those about him. ‘How many can work at once?’ he asked, turning to the engineer.

‘I’ll take a dozen down to start with,’ said the other, and send up for as many more as we can find room for.’

Joe set himself at the young surveyor’s side, marched with him to the edge of the shaft of the neighbouring mine, and descended with the first batch. The surveyor indicated the place at which the work should be begun, and in as little time as it takes to tell it, the men were stripped, and at it.

Not only the intense and absorbing hope of saving life, but the element of uncertainty

which beset the enterprise, inspired the workers with almost superhuman vigour. There was not a man there who did not in his own mind so exaggerate the difference of the accurate and inaccurate methods of measurements that he hoped at every stroke of the pick to break in on the imprisoned party, and this ever-present hope remained, though deferred for hours, and then again deferred. And amongst all the workers none wrought with such a passion of despair and hope as Joe himself. Morning dawned, party had relieved party, and the work had gone on for many hours without a pause, before his hands, wearied to helplessness, let fall the pick, and even then he sat in the level beyond the workmen, and watched how every stroke told, until in his wild impatience at the slowness of the work's progress, he could, but that he restrained himself, have risen to tear at the wall which imprisoned Dinah, with his finger nails. His first mad burst of labour had so worn and spent him that his hands hung powerless at his sides, and when a friendly miner brought him food and drink he could

not reach out a finger towards either of them. Food he refused, but he drank greedily from the cup held to his lips, and sat on there, watching, as relay after relay of men relieved each other, and the black tunnel yawned deeper and deeper, and the wall of its far-end melted slowly.

Every now and then when the 'shot' was prepared the men, retiring from the coming explosion, forced him gently away, but he always came back and took his old seat, and watched with the old impatient hunger.

But a new thought struck Joe at last, and he was away to the telegraph office again, the Scotchman at his side, to wire to London for a diver, to hold communication with the prisoners if might be, and if it might be, to carry them provisions. Joe had a scheme of lowering barrels filled with food, wine, candles, and lamps, and loaded to make them sink to the foot of the shaft. He would have a chain lashed to each barrel, and the diver should carry the chains, and the prisoners tug up the barrels and provisions themselves,

and have hope again, and some comfort whilst they waited for deliverance.

‘Don’t be too sanguine, sir,’ said his new-found friend; ‘I’m sorely afraid of the gas.’

‘What gas?’ cried Joe.

In those old workings (the manager told him sorrowfully), from which the water broke, there was a terrible chance that there were hollows which the springs had not filled up. If that were so, there would be bred from the stagnant water, in the womb of earth, gases fatal to life: these gases would follow the water, spread into the new workings into which the flood had broken, and slowly but surely choke every living creature there.

‘That is almost our greatest fear,’ he added; ‘and it was best that you should know it.’

‘I might have known it,’ groaned Joe, ‘if I had only thought about it.’

‘Young Keen knew those old workings,’ said the engineer, ‘but he’s *down*, too, and I doubt if anybody else knows much about them. The shaft’s not overbuilt, I know, and that’s

some comfort. It depends, ye see, on the way the workings run. If they run away upward from the foot of the shaft, as they do in the Buzzard yon, there'll be gas there, because the bottom of the shaft would fill with water first; but if they run down or pretty level, the gradual flow of water would push the air out, and leave none behind to get foul and choke poor fellows' lives out o' them.'

'Pray Heaven they may run downwards!' said Joe.

'Amen!' said his companion, though he added, 'it's past praying about, for the ways were made eighty years ago. We'll just have to wait and see, ma poor friend.'

Meantime, how did it fare with the imprisoned?

There were drowned bodies floating in the dark caverns there, none could yet tell how many. The survivors numbered sixty-seven, all told—the three women, their two companions, and sixty-two miners. These last, when the news of the peril reached them, came trooping down with their lamps, a doleful

crowd, and lolled about by the edge of the water, talking in hoarse murmurs with each other. This went on for hours.

‘Men,’ said John Keen at last, standing on a truck and speaking in a loud firm voice, ‘listen to me. You know me, most of you, and you know I know my business, and you’ll take my advice. You know where this water came from?’

‘Yes,’ answered two or three. ‘It must ha’ come from th’ ode workin’s.’

‘It comes from the old workings of the Sill Pit. Do you know what will follow it when they begin to pump it down?’

‘Choke damp,’ said one voice.

‘Choke damp,’ John Keen repeated. ‘Then what chance have we?’

‘None but i’ God’s mercy i’ the next world,’ said the man who had answered last.

‘Yes,’ said John, ‘one chance in this world. A chance to build an air-tight wall of coal here. A chance to wait until they can clear the mine of water and gas and set us free again.’

‘That’s a poor chance,’ said one. ‘It’s a

chance o' lingerin' till we're dyin' o' starvation, Mr. Keen, an' I, for one, says "Lie down an' go to sleep, an' let the gas come up, an' have it o'er an' done wi'."

'I say "No" to that!' cried John Keen. 'I say that whilst we have these ladies with us, it's our business to do all we can for them. I say, besides, that no man has a right to throw away the life God gave him, or to lay it down if he can help it until God calls him. Who says with me?'

'I do' and 'I do' here and there among the crowd, but for the most part the men were dumb and despairing.

'Then let us set to work like men,' cried John descending. 'Three men to the front with spades. I want every inch of mud that we can get to fill up the chinks of the wall. We can beat earth and slack up with the water there. And then coal for the wall. Work, lads, and trust in God.'

'Right, Mr. Keen,' said one old grey-bearded man. 'Let's ask a word o' blessing on the work.'

‘Pray *while* you work, Gibbons,’ said John, who knew the old fellow as a Methodist local preacher of signal piety. ‘We can’t afford to waste a minute.’

‘There’s no time wasted i’ praying God,’ said the old man, and lifted a hand for silence. The men bowed and bared their heads. ‘Lord, spare us,’ he prayed hoarsely, ‘to see our wives an’ our little ’uns once more if it be Thy holy will ; an’ if not, prepare us to see Thy face. And we ask it for the Lord’s sake. Amen !’

‘Amen !’ here and there hoarsely answered from the crowd.

‘I’ve a hand in this work, lads,’ cried Cheston. ‘God helps them that help themselves. That’s Scripture, Gibbons, eh ?’

‘No, Sir Sydney,’ said the old man ; ‘it’s a good word, but it ain’t between the boards o’ the Bible.’

Stirred by example, the more despairing took heart and set to work with the rest. The barrier against death rose higher and higher, and while the work went on, it was noticed that all on a sudden the water began palpably to ebb.

‘They are pumping amazingly up there,’ said John Keen. ‘Work, lads, work, for life or death!’

All was order and quiet, no man interfering with another, but all working in concert. And the wall was three feet thick, and as solid as mud and coal could make it. They were closing it in at the roof, and men with spades were busy plastering the inner side, when all at once a portion of the upper surface gave way, a hundredweight of coal rolled down, and a human figure with it. There was one piercing shriek as they came to earth together—then a heart-rending groan and quiet.

‘It’s Mister Keen, lads,’ said old Gibbons. ‘Steady there. Don’t drag at the poor lad i’ that way! Pull the coal off first.’

‘Never mind me,’ said John faintly. ‘Put me in the truck there and get along. For God’s sake, save the women!’

‘Ay, ay!’ said one, and two or three lifted him gently.

‘Set me where I can see the work,’ said John valiantly, and fainted.

The rough fellows left him to the women, and went back to their fight with death. In a while their work was complete, the last cranny stopped, the inner surface of their wall of salvation as smooth as the top of a table.

I have forbore to tell you of the women's thoughts, and I still forbear, for I desire to have no reader who has not heart enough to guess how terrible they might be. They had sat in quiet at least until now, and had made no outward moan. The words which had been spoken in their hearing, the work which had been done before them, told, too clearly for misunderstanding, the nature of their peril, and they bore it in quiet. Sir Sydney, in his shirt sleeves, and all begrimed with coal dust and sweat, had paused once or twice with an unvarying formula.

'We'll cheat the devil yet, my dears,' said the Baronet sturdily. And indeed in Sir Sydney Cheston's mind there was present very visibly a battle with the actual Enemy in his own abode of darkness, and he spoke with no profanity or levity.

John's swoon faded into sleep, and sleep broke into a painful yet delicious dream. He was lying somewhere in the dark at rest, after some awful toil, and suddenly Ethel's face appeared before him with a heavenly light about it. And she reached out a hand and touched him, and the touch was agony. Yet it *was* her hand and the touch was meant for kindness.

‘Ethel,’ he murmured. ‘My love! Ethel!’

He awoke, and her face was indeed bent over him.

‘Did I hurt you?’ she asked softly. ‘Pray be still, I will hurt you as little as possible.’

His arm was broken, and his ribs were crushed, and the women during his swoon had cut away the cloth from his wounds, and with fragments torn from their own dresses were binding them to stop their bleeding. Some of the men stood round the truck, and the light from one of their closed lamps fell softly and dimly upon Ethel's face. John looked up to her once with his dark eyes filmed with pain, and yet with a glance of ineffable love in them. If he died, he thought, he died to save her. A

thrill of passionate hope went through him. If he were her sacrifice—accepted. The hope became a prayer. Great dangers and great love breed such hopes and prayers in great hearts. He prayed with all his soul to die for her if his life might be taken for hers, and he swooned again.

Ethel had heard his words, and they had not fallen upon her ears alone. There was no revelation for her in the random ‘My love’ born of a dream of ecstasy and agony. She had known that this gallant-hearted lad had loved her, long and long ago it seemed, before she herself had altogether learned to love a scoundrel, and she had fixed her heart upon the clay and had despised the gold. Well, there was her destiny. She had not known. He was brave, this wounded young fellow, undaunted in the face of death, full of resource when men used to peril had given up the cause of life in despair. And in the girl’s mind, there was no hope of escape—none ! The man loved her. Was that a crime, that she had treated him so coldly for it?

She and Dinah and Miss Cheston bound his wounds, and the miners brought their heavy flannel jackets and laid them out so as to make a couch as comfortable as might be. Some of the men had tea with them, carried in the tin bottles miners use, and these by general consent were stored up for the sufferer. As for the rest of them, they could wait. Cheston's watch was going still—it was his habit to wind it in the morning—and it marked seven o'clock. They had been fifteen hours in the mine already, then, and so far nobody had thought of sleep. The lamps died out, and one of the men set off in the darkness for a store of candles kept in a stable in the upper workings.

‘Only one light at a time,’ said Sir Sydney ; and the little dim lamp was set upon a ledge in the wall, and twinkled there duskily, scarcely making darkness visible.

The men, worn out, sat down or lay about the coaly floor here and there, and slept. The heat was sweltering. Sir Sydney, having seen to the women, took his seat by John Keen, and waited and watched there in company with his

own thoughts. So for many hours there was silence, and if any man awoke, he had no desire to speak to his neighbour, but turned and strove to get to sleep again.

This was the goal, then, to which Cheston's good-natured impetuosity had led him, and not him only.

'I meant it for the best,' he said bitterly a thousand times, but the repetition was not of much comfort to him.

John stirred uneasily and moaned every now and then, and the watchful Baronet moistened his lips with cold tea from one of the tin bottles. The time went slowly, as if on leaden wings. Cheston would rise on tiptoe every half-hour or thereabouts and look at his watch by the one glimmering Davy lamp, and every time he did so he set it to his ear believing it had stopped. But while his thoughts galloped, time seemed to stand still, and every half-hour was like a day. At last, when some six or seven dreary hours had slipped away, he also fell asleep, and once or twice the wounded man moaned in vain. Ethel hearing him, arose,

and set the cold tea to his lips. He clutched the bottle greedily, and would have drained it but for her interposing hand. She re-arranged the rough flannel garments on which he lay, making his couch easier, and again he knew her, and she seemed to hang above him like a pitying and ministering angel.

‘Can I do anything more for you, Mr. Keen?’ she asked, seeing that his eyes followed her with a look of intelligence.

‘Thank you,’ he answered faintly. ‘Nothing more.’

The girl sat by the side of the truck, with one hand upon the edge of it. When she had sat thus a long time and had grown absorbed in thought, she was startled by a soft cold pressure, and looking hastily round, she saw that John had struggled up on his sound arm, had bent over and was kissing her hand. She rose and laid him gently down again.

‘Lie still,’ she said, ‘or you will hurt yourself.’ She could not find it in her heart to offer any severer rebuke than this.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MR. GEORGE BUSHELL, the younger, sitting at his desk one bright soft spring afternoon, earning as lightly as he could some fraction of the weekly five-and-thirty shillings, was startled by the sudden advent of a stranger who demanded him by name. The stranger turned out to be one of Sir Sydney Cheston's clerks, and was charged with a message from young George's father ; a message to the effect that young George must at once betake himself to Staffordshire under circumstances of great urgency. An ice-taloned pang—as Mr. Carlyle once wrote *à propos* of Balaam—ran through brain and pericardium, but the young man dared not disobey. It was in his mind that he was to be confronted with Sir Sydney, who would beyond doubt remember him, and he was terrified at

the bare thought of the encounter. George's employer made some faint opposition to his going, but the messenger assured him of the gravity of the occasion, and, acting on instructions, gave no explanation to the youngster. The time spent in the journey was full of uncomfortable reflections and sensations, but George had no stomach for questioning his new companion, and the clerk himself, being of a solid and stolid business mind, offered no remark from start to finish. Even the dreariest journeys come to an end, and at last young George's journey terminated in the presence of his father on the bank of the Buzzard, crowded still by thousands of spectators.

‘There has been an accident here,’ said Joe quietly; ‘have you read of it in the news papers?’

‘No,’ said George.

Joe told the story.

‘All that can be done,’ he added, ‘we are doing. I thought it best that you should be here.’

Young George could scarcely tell why.

Dinah's danger concerned him very nearly, and although he was not a sympathetic young man, he felt horrified at the story. He had never disliked Dinah, actively, and it was certainly awful that she should be placed in such a position. Her peril was in part his own, for if she should not be recovered, what shield or hope had he? This terrible father of his might keep him at clerkship all his life, and on the least pretence leave all his money to a charity, to a friend, to a wife perhaps. So that, taking it altogether, young George experienced and displayed as much grief as could be expected of him.

Among other aids for which Joe had called, the diver came from London, and made a descent, but speedily returned with discouraging news. The mouth of the working had fallen in, and there was no possible passage at present. The women, wives and daughters of the imprisoned miners, who sat in the hovels about the top of the shaft, maintained the quiet characteristic of their kind in such times of peril. They refused to eat, for there is a superstition among them that to take food seals the fate of their

dear ones below. All of them sat in silence with their shawls drawn over their heads, and waited with a patience heart-wringing to look at.

‘Thee sha’st have him back, Selina, if it’s i’ mon’s power to do it,’ said William Bowker to his wife whenever he passed her, and he always went back to the work with renewed passion and vigour after these words of cheer.

Some feeble power to grasp returning to Joe’s hands, he was down the mine again, and for a while insisted on being allowed to take a place once more, but seeing by-and-by how weak his strokes were, and recognising the fact that he filled the place of a better man, he fell back sadly, and was fain to content himself once more with watching. Whenever he could do it without interrupting the work he paced the tunnel, measuring it by his strides, and always came back, groaning over the slowness of its progress. The Scotch engineer begged him again and again to rest, even though the man who gave the advice recognised the impossibility of it. But at last, when the work had been prosecuted for fifty hours, a ‘shot’ was fired,

and the men rushing back to renew their labour, started a cheer, for lo! the wall was down. Joe ran to join them at this cheering sound, but before he had reached the end of the tunnel the men fell back upon him and bore him away with them, and for a while recoiled slowly backwards, step by step, and turning, ran to the foot of the shaft, bearing him amongst them, struggling and imploring.

‘It’s all over, master,’ said one man sadly, ‘the place is full o’ choke damp.’

They all ascended to the mouth of the mine and told the mournful news.

In the mind of every man and woman there it made an end of hope. The women began to eat, moistening their food with tears, and by ones, and twos, and threes, they stole away to their homes.

‘It’s all o’er, Master Joseph,’ said Bowker.

‘Yes,’ said Joe, ‘it’s all over.’

A cloud was round him, and he felt himself a murderer. But though hope had gone, labour could not yet be relaxed. The gas became so dense in the shaft, that when a cage

of fire was lowered into it—an iron framework holding more than a hundredweight of glowing coal—the light went out as completely and as suddenly as if it had been dipped in water. Even for this last sad contingency the workers were prepared, and the task of clearing the mine was carried on as swiftly as if hope still reigned in every bosom. 'The manner of the clearing was simple and (all things considered) rapid. At the edge of the shaft was set up a revolving fan, and running from this was a wide tube of iron, not unlike a stove-pipe. After travelling straight for a yard, the pipe took a sudden bend and dipped into the shaft. The fan being set in motion forced a fierce current of wind through the tube, and in a few minutes the topmost section of the shaft was sufficiently ventilated to permit of a man being sent down to attach a second length of tubing to the first. This in its turn prepared for the attachment of a third, and that of a fourth, and so hour by hour the tube crept slowly downward, each length being secured by a holdfast driven firmly into the wall, and all

the junctures being smeared with clay. The crowd had long since melted, and it was midnight when the foot of the shaft was reached, and men in relays could be set to carry the ventilating tube farther, and step by step the devilish gas was fought out of the mine, and hopeless morning dawned. Joe, despairing and self-accusing, found the tremendous physical strain of the labour a relief to him. He could not think much or even feel much yet. Four sleepless nights and days laid their hand of heaviness upon his heart, and he felt only a wretched numbness. His despair and his self-accusations seemed to lie in wait for him hereafter, and in the meantime he worked as madly to get at Dinah's dead body as he had worked while hope remained with him.

There was a dreary drizzle falling when he ascended the shaft with his rough mining companions, and left the work to a new relay of men below. Young George had, of course, long since known the end. He was sorry for Dinah ; he was as grieved about Ethel as it was in him to be grieved about anything, and he

had taken his turn at work, not altogether without manliness and courage. Joe had some sore-hearted hope of him.

‘ You had better lie down and get a little sleep,’ said George to his father, as they stood in the drizzle together at the mouth of the shaft; and Joe, without a word of answer, walked into one of the hovels and lay down. He tossed to and fro for half-an-hour, courting sleep in vain, in spite of his fatigue and the enormous labours of the past few days. He seemed to hear the voice which shook Macbeth—

Methought I heard a voice cry ‘ Sleep no more.’

The horror of his thoughts, his unavailing repentance, the memory of his errors, were so heavy upon him that he rose again, and walking once more to the head of the shaft, demanded to be lowered.

‘ May I go with you ? ’ asked George.

Human motives are complex things, and there was probably some real human pity and repentance in the young man’s heart when he made this request.

‘As you like,’ his father answered. The two went down together, without another word, and after a while came in sight of the last relay, with Bowker in command. The men were at work at a great heap of *débris*, which when Joe had left it had completely blocked up the roadway, and they had so reduced it that by this time there was ample space for a man to climb over. The air was heavy, and the lamps were burning dimly.

‘Theer’s damp beyond still, Master Joseph,’ said Bowker.

‘Ay,’ said Joe quietly. ‘How much higher do you think the water rose?’

‘Theer’s a sort of a sudden lift, like, here,’ returned William. ‘The poor things ’ud tek refuge a bit farther on. We shall light on some on ’em when this is down.’ He pointed to the mound in front.

Joe, turning away, pushed through the men, climbed up the heap of rubbish, and waved his glimmering lamp to and fro in the darkness, striving to make out what lay beyond. Suddenly he cried out in a wild voice

which made every man there turn to look at him.

‘Bowker! Come here!’ William scrambled up to his side. ‘What’s that?’ cried Joe, pointing eagerly through the darkness.

‘Gi’ me a lamp theer!’ William called to one of the men below.

The two fell rather than scrambled down the slimy inner side of the bank, and advanced a yard or two.

‘Send I may live,’ gasped William, ‘they’ve builded a wall again’ the damp. That’s young Keen’s doin’, I lay my life. Zakiel,’ he roared, ‘bring a peck here!’

He dashed back to meet the man who brought the pick, snatched it from his hand at the summit of the mound, dashed back again, and waving Joe aside, struck blow after blow upon the wall with the energy of a madman, and then ceasing suddenly, he set his ear against the coal and listened.

‘Stop work theer,’ he yelled a second later. ‘Still as death every mon among ye.’

All sounds of labour ceased, and a death-

like silence, broken only by a heavy breathing here and there, fell upon the place. Joe followed his companion's example, and set his ear to the coal wall.

Tap! tap! tap! upon the wall within.

'Lads,' roared the little man in a voice like a hoarse trumpet, 'theer's some on 'em alive! This way.'

Joe caught the pick from Bowker's hand and drove it deep into an interstice between two huge lumps of coal, and tugged so wildly that the shaft of the tool broke, and he reeled against the side of the working. But there were hearts behind as willing as his own, and arms as strong. The miners charged the heap of rubbish with a gasping cheer, and fell upon the wall of salvation as men in desperate battle fall upon a foe.

'David,' said Bowker, laying his hand upon one man's shoulder, 'goo up an' bring down every mon theer. Get the trolley-line cleared all along.'

'Right, gaffer,' answered David, and sped away.

‘Yo’ heerd ’em tap, mister?’ asked one coal-blackened giant as he worked.

‘Stop, all of you!’ cried Joe.

They ceased, and in the sudden silence they could hear the sound of a score of picks beating at the other side. At that glad token they raised a cheer, and fell upon the wall again like drilled furies, until a dim light shone through.

‘Who’s that?’ one of the rescuers shouted.

‘Ebenezer Howl,’ said a voice inside.

‘How many on you?’ cried Bowker.

‘Sixty-seven,’ said Ebenezer Howl.

‘That’s my feyther,’ said another voice.

‘Is that Bill Bowker?’

‘Me, lad. God bless thee!’ William answered, with the tears channelling his dusky face.

‘Cheston!’ called Joe.

‘Right!’ answered the Baronet’s voice.

‘Set to it!’ Bowker cried. ‘Get ’em out o’ this!’

The work began again on both sides, and in a little while a breach was made. By some sort of common consent—for by this time every rough fellow there knew his story—Joe Bushell

was the first man allowed to climb through. Cheston grasped him by the hand. Neither could say more than 'God bless you!' but the words expressed their own meaning, and were spoken from the heart.

'This way,' said Cheston, after a moment's pause.

The men had torn the lamp open, and by this time the whole remaining store of candles burned dimly in the foul and abominable air. Almost every man held a light, and Joe could see the face and figure he had last seen at Wrethedale. He ran forward and seized Dinah by the hands.

'Dinah,' he said, 'do you know me?'

She answered not a word, but rose gasping, and looked wildly at him, he holding her by both hands.

'You know me, Dinah?'

She drew her hands away, and casting both arms about his neck, and calling on his name, she fainted. Joe bore her to the foot of the shaft—he would allow no hands but his own to touch her—and they were carried swiftly to

the open light of day. The message despatched half-an-hour ago had flown far already, and all about the fields were hurried figures making for the mine, and any hurried figure seen from a mile away wending in that direction was taken as a signal, as in such cases it always is, so that the whole district far and wide was wakened to a mad mingling of hope and wonder, and a thousand men and women were on their way to the Buzzard's mouth from every point of the compass. When Joe appeared bearing his burden in his arms, there were perhaps a hundred people gathered round the shaft, and from them rose a roar of questioning.

‘Alive?’

The tears were streaming down Joe's cheeks, and he answered in a broken voice,

‘Alive!’

They cheered like mad things, and far and near about the fields arose answering shouts of cheering. A hundred hands were stretched to offer help, but Joe laid his blessed burden down unaided and knelt beside it.

‘ How many down, mister?’ asked one old woman, touching him on the shoulder ; ‘ how many?’

‘ Sixty-seven,’ Joe answered.

‘ Alive?’

‘ Alive and well, thank God,’ said Joe.

The hearers shouted with wild cheer on cheer, answering voices came from the rainy fields, hurrying steps quickened to a headlong race, the crowd swelled and gathered with mad hurrahings, the news was asked by each newcomer, and told again with husky shouts of triumph and delight. Men who were strangers to each other, rough fellows unused to the melting mood, shook hands with tears. Women embraced each other, or knelt in thanksgiving. Workers in neighbouring factories cast down their tools and ran, shouting the news of rescue right and left, and the crowd grew as if by magic, until the surging mob rose high about the mound, and every place of vantage was flooded by the human wave.

Ethel, bravely as she had borne herself through the long night of danger and famine,

fainted when she heard the news of rescue, and she and Dorothea were brought to the light unconscious of the maddening cheers which hailed them. Then came John Keen muttering rapidly in the delirium of fever, and at the sight of his pale face and prone bandaged figure the crowd forbore to cheer. But the cheering began again with the next batch, and went on with increase as the crowd grew vaster.

By-and-by, amongst the rescued came a patriarch, Aminadab Hick by name, who had a place in this chronicle once before, though but a slight one. Dinah's mother bade him good-night six-and-twenty years before this, and he was an old man by this time. His imprisonment, and the want of food and water, had been almost too much for him, yet a touch of native valour and humour brightened his heart as he reached the surface and saw heaven's blessed light again.

It was noticeable that the patriarch was bare-footed when brought to bank. He was so reduced that it was needful for one man to take him by the legs and another by the

shoulders to bear him through the crowd. Sighting a local cobbler there, he called out to him feebly, with a quavering chuckle :

‘ Bill ! Bill Dyson ! ’

‘ Hillo ! ’ said the local cobbler.

‘ Got that theer pair o’ boots I give you a order for, done yet ? ’ asked the patriarch.

‘ No,’ said the cobbler.

‘ Look sharp about ’em then,’ said the patriarch, pointing to his feet. ‘ I shall want ’em pretty soon. I have eaten my old ’uns.’

There was a great guffaw of laughter, in which the prostrate patriarch joined feebly as he was borne away. His daughter was waiting for him in the crowd, and they were crying and blessing each other tenderly a minute later. And every time the skip ascended with its load of rescued men there were such scenes as you may fancy. Mothers and children met husbands and fathers ; sisters welcomed brothers ; sweethearts, a little coy, perhaps, before this awful danger came, cast off all coyness now, and met their lovers with fast-falling tears and

clinging kisses and twining arms, and heart joined heart no more to be divided. With the last batch came Cheston, pale and grimed, but sturdy, and waved a cheer to the roaring crowd, who made at him and took him shoulder-high, and patrolled with him in mad fashion about the mound, until it occurred to some of the more collected spirits that after a four days' fast a substantial man like Sir Sydney might naturally wish for something more solid than the mere breath of popular applause. Food and wines and restoratives of all sorts were there in plenty, provided in the first hopeful days, and by-and-by the Baronet was on his legs with a steaming jorum of beef-tea in his hands.

‘Your health, lads,’ he said in his cheerful voice, nodding round before he drank. ‘God bless you!’

The Baronet's carriage and horses had been quartered close by, and a hurried message being now despatched for them, they came.

The men would fain have taken out the horses, and dragged Cheston and his party home in triumph, but he forbade them.

‘Think of the women, my lads,’ he shouted. ‘They want rest and quiet.’

At this appeal the crowd forbore. There were a thousand things to be done, and no man for the moment with a head worth a straw upon his shoulders. Young George stood clumsily in the inner circle, not knowing what to do, yet longing to do something to be of service, or to look as if he were of service; something to break through the cloud which rested upon him. Why had he not been the first to discover the wall which had kept the prisoners in safety? Or why, since chance went against him there, had he not seized a pick and made his way through first of all? He would willingly have done something to redeem himself, if he had only seen his way to it, and the way had not been dangerous over and above the reasonable. As it was, he could only stand there, a little hangdog in his looks, known to everybody about him as a convicted felon, and shunning everybody’s eyes. And the girl who had been his plighted wife was lying in a dead swoon within six yards of him,

and he had no right to go near her. Hands coarsened with habitual labour had brought her here; hands foul enough with mire and coal dust, but cleaner than his after all, and worthier to touch her. There was his old friend and companion lying wounded and unconscious. He *would* do something, after all.

He pushed forward, and in doing so accidentally thrust against William Bowker.

‘Bowker,’ said George with hangdog looks, ‘poor Mr. Keen looks very ill. Where can we get him to? What is the nearest place?’

‘Nothin’ nearer than my cottage,’ said William readily. ‘We’ll tek him theer. Get that door off its hinges, lads.’

Half-a-dozen men ran to obey the order, and the door being unshipped, John was laid upon it, and borne gently across the field, the crowd making way. George, with hangdog air, went on in front, commanding and entreating in shame-stricken fashion, and on reaching the cottage door opened it for the bearers, and gave one of the men the only half-crown he had to run for a doctor. The man started off, and

George stayed with his whilom rival, old friend, and enemy, but before the doctor came he had other and less welcome visitors.

Sir Sydney Cheston was for putting his sister and Ethel and Dinah into the carriage, and driving off with them at once, as they were, but this rash counsel was overruled. When Dinah recovered she saw above her her husband's face, and Joe was holding a teaspoonful of brandy and water to her lips. Seeing her partially recovered, Joe called for beef-tea, and Dinah lay back crying feebly, but with infinite happiness and contentment sipping at the spoon he held to her lips. One of the miners' sisters had already taken Miss Donne in hand, and was pouring sherry by the teaspoonful through her pale lips, and by-and-by the girl revived and sat up. Cheston's attentions restored his sister, and in a little while the women became collected enough to observe the great crowd of eager-eyed people watching them, and modesty taking alarm, they rose and begged to be taken away.

‘Not yet, my darlin’,’ said the woman who

had charge of Ethel. 'Come into th' offices, ladies, an' pick a bit o' somethin' gradual like, my dears, an' get your stren'ths up.'

So they went into the offices and mixed feeble tears with sherry and beef-tea, and sipped the compound, until Ethel, who had hitherto been more than half-dazed, even since her recovery from her swoon, demanded to be informed of the condition of Mr. Keen.

'He saved all our lives,' she said. 'Where is he?'

For the moment nobody knew, but a word of inquiry traced him, and after a space of half-an-hour or so, Cheston gave his arm to his sister, and led the way, Joe following with Dinah on his arm, and Ethel supported by the gallant Bowker in the rear. The women were all three terribly bedragged and dirty, and Mrs. Bowker dashed about for water and towels, brushes and soap, and helped them at their toilet. They had not starved altogether during their imprisonment, for some of the men who had food with them had voluntarily surrendered it for the women. The fare was coarse and unaccustomed,

but after the first day hunger drove them to it, and they had enough to save them from actual famine. But the stress and strain of emotions during that long night—a night of ninety hours, which dragged like ninety years—had left them so haggard and woe-begone in aspect that they looked near death's door.

George was in the kitchen by John Keen's side when they passed through the tiny front parlour and went upstairs, and peeping through a chink in the door he saw them. He was more than half-inclined to run away, but he bethought himself, and resolved to be seen in the act of doing something helpful. So he still shamefacedly sat by the side of John Keen, and was there when his father and Cheston entered. Whilst the two stood looking at the patient and talking in quiet tones about him, the doctor came, and pronounced the case serious.

‘Get the best men in England to see him, Holmes,’ said the Baronet. ‘I’d rather spend my last penny than lose him. He saved us all.’

The doctor did what was to be done for the time being, and then mounted the stairs to at-

tend the women. Mrs. Bowker was haranguing in shrill reproof of their desire to go away.

‘Why, it’s six mile if it’s a foot,’ cried Mrs. Bowker, ‘an’ it ’ud just be mere murderin’ madness to think on it. You lie down o’ this bed, an’ theer’s room for two i’ th’ other room, an’ have a nice long sleep, an’ a good meal when you’re rested. An’ here’s the doctor, an’ I’ll bet a pound he says as I say.’

‘I certainly say as you say, Mrs. Bowker,’ observed the doctor, glancing round. ‘Ladies, I forbid you to attempt even so short a journey without rest. A little composing draught for each of you—a little sleep—and I trust to avoid all evil consequences.’

Mr. Bowker at this moment was busily transferring a bed from a neighbour’s house, with the neighbour’s readily given help, and this was set up in the parlour, and John Keen with infinite tenderness comfortably undressed and settled in it. The women obeyed the doctor’s orders. Cheston, unwilling to leave them, took a great draught of wine, and cast himself upon the kitchen sofa and fell asleep there. Joe

threw himself upon the rough rug before the fire, with a rolled-up coat for a pillow, and lay wakeful for a long while with his heart full of gratitude and tenderness and resolve. But in a while he also fell asleep, and being utterly worn out by four nights and days of mental agony and bodily labour, he lay like a log, and no dreams visited him. The tenant of the cottage, with his wife and their recovered son, betook themselves to the brewhouse, and having made a roaring fire there, lay down upon the floor and slept also.

Nine worn-out people slumbered in the house and one kept watch, until under the soothing influence of the opiate the doctor had administered, John Keen's sleep became as profound as that of the rest; and young George walked on tiptoe out of the house, and lit his pipe, and rambled across the field, by this time deserted. Where ten thousand cheering, weeping, half-mad men and women had stood two hours ago, not a creature was to be seen. He had peeped round the side of the house to be sure that the coast was clear, and being satisfied of it, he walked on with bent

head and looked at his prospects with a failing heart. Lifting his eyes he saw the house of his old employer some quarter of a mile away, and this bringing George Bushell the elder into his mind, he cursed him with great ardour, and roamed on again.

‘The old villain!’ so thought and said the young one. ‘He knew who I was all the time, and kept me out of my money, and sent me to prison like a felon, and—— Curse him! It’s too much for a man to bear to think of.’ He stopped to kick a clod of earth savagely, and then roamed on again. Having once got old George in his mind, it was not easy to let him out, and having him there, it was not in human nature, so he said, to hold back from cursing him. The mine offices were empty, and he entered one of them and sat down moodily, tracing out, as he had done a thousand times already, old George’s villanies. ‘The infernal old hypocrite!’ cried the young man aloud. He had naturally a great loathing of the old man’s crimes, and felt as righteous an anger at them as any morally spotless man could feel,

and his anger being of the sort which demands to be flogged, he rose up from the seat he had taken, and travelling rapidly up and down the room, he gave such comminatory eloquence as he had full swing until he was in the mind to have taken the wicked old George by the throat, with full intent to choke the rascally old life out of him.

Turning suddenly in his vengeful promenade and muttering to himself, he actually thought for one second that he beheld an apparition; for there in the doorway stood old George, leaning on a couple of walking-sticks, and peering with a purblind look into the room. The old man's house overlooked the scene of action. He had heard the news of the rescue, had watched the crowd disperse, and seeing the carriage driven away again, supposed everybody gone.

'Who's there?' he quavered, peering into the half gloom of the place with purblind look. 'I can't see nothin' close at hand, without glasses,' he murmured, and having transferred his right hand stick to his left hand, he began

to fumble at the pocket of his overcoat, and after a time found his glasses, and with shaky fingers set them astride his nose, the two walking-sticks rattling in his left hand as he did it. It was amazing how much less righteously indignant the younger rascal felt, finding himself thus unexpectedly in presence of the old one. But he glared at old George, and old George, able to make him out now, glared at him, with each of his hands quavering on his unsteady walking-sticks, and his jaw quite fallen.

‘Why?’ said old George at last. ‘Why—why—what’s this? Eh?’

His tone was that of a man awestruck. Young George took heart at it.

‘I met my father and returned to England,’ said he, not lying in words but only in intent—a thing that soothed his conscience greatly—‘and I know now how to value your Christian kindness, sir.’

The emphasis on ‘Christian’ was a memory of Miss Bateman’s ‘Leah.’

‘I’d ha’ acted well by you if you’d ha’ de-

served it,' said the old man, in a loud quavering voice. 'But you was a bad lot.'

'I think,' said young George, 'that *you* have very little right to reproach me, sir. And let me tell you, that if it had not been for my influence—— But I need waste no words about that. Let me pass, sir. We two can have little to say to each other.'

'I'd ha' acted well by you,' old George repeated, 'if you'd ha' deserved it.'

'Do you suppose,' asked the martyred young George disdainfully—'were you ever able to pretend to yourself that you supposed I meant to steal that three hundred pounds?'

'Meant to steal it? Why, you stole it.'

'I never stole a marriage certificate,' returned the younger. 'I never——'

'What!' cried the old man trembling from head to foot. 'You speak them words again, an' I'll mek you prove 'em. You viper. What was you ever born for but to bring trouble? I give my nevew Joseph a hunderd pounds to run away from home wi', an' he comes back an' robs me underhanded, an' leaves me to find out as he's

back again, by accident. If it hadn't ha' been for me ycu'd ha' been a-lyin' in jail this minute. You stingin' viper! You come an' talk to me! I'll settle you. You ever speak a word to me again, you jail-bird, you, an' I'll break every bone i' your skin. I've a mind to do it now.'

And old George did indeed stagger at the martyr with such a paralytic rage that George the younger incontinently got out of the building and replied from without.

'I don't want to hurt you,' he said, 'and you had better keep your distance, Mr. Bushell.'

'Let me get at you,' quavered old George, 'an' I'll be the death on you.'

'The thing would be more likely to go the other way,' young George replied, retreating. 'But I'm not going to fight with a man who has both feet in the grave.'

'Yah, you coward!' snarled old George. 'Stand still, you dog, an' I'll flog your life out.'

'Lay a hand on me,' shouted young George, retreating still, 'and you'll be sorry for it.'

‘You’ve got a bold tongue enough,’ said the other, pausing and panting and shaking one of his paralytic sticks, ‘but you tek uncommon good care to be out o’ reach.’

‘I’m not going to allow myself to be struck by a man on whom I can’t retaliate without dishonour,’ said young George, pausing likewise.

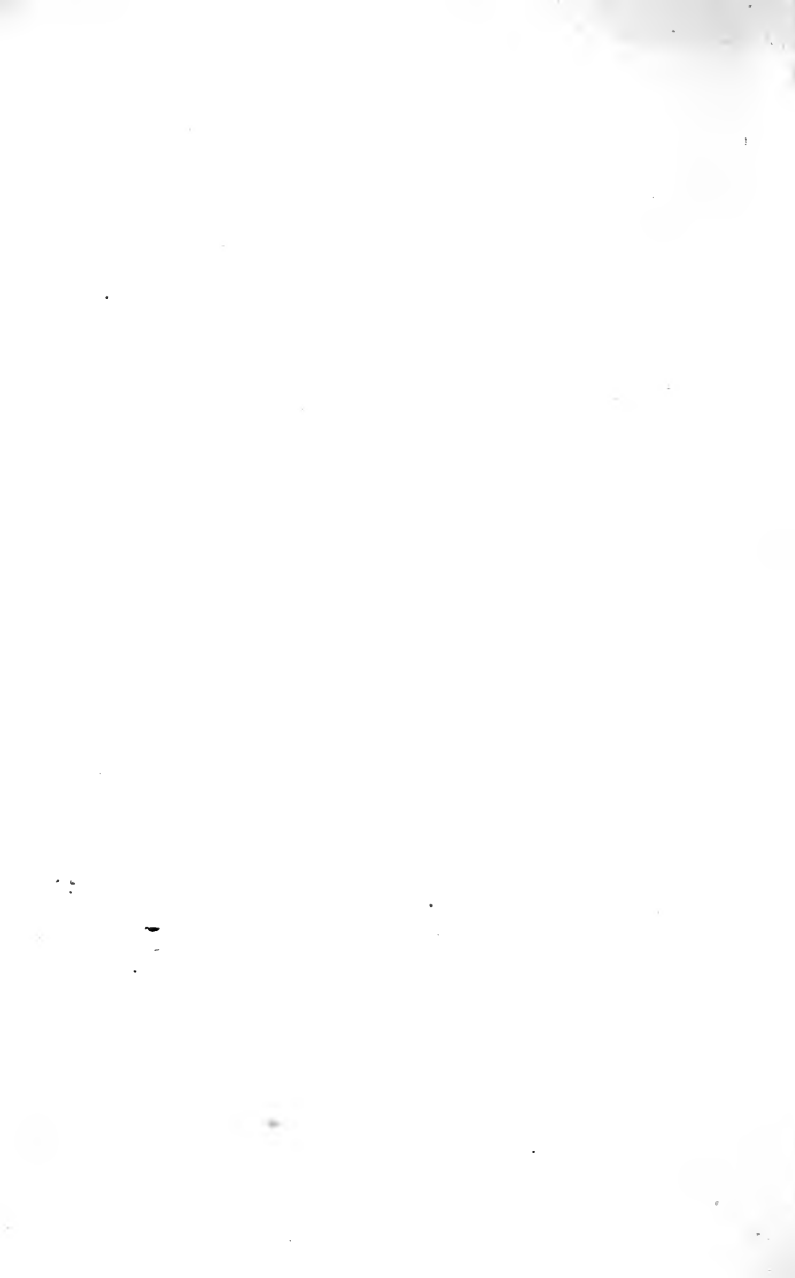
This statement so affected the old man that he stood shaking both his sticks in the air in a rage altogether impotent, and ground imprecations between his teeth.

‘They call you a respectable man still,’ cried young George, warming with the recollection of his wrongs, ‘and I am a felon. But what right have you to speak a word of reproach to me? You! Why I never heard of such a villain.’

How much further young George’s candour and indignation might have carried him cannot be known, for his hearer began to stagger and to grope feebly in the air, and to see again before him that awful mist with the splashes of red and black in it. He was surely going to



'Lay a hand on me, and you'll be sorry for it.'



die this time. The hand of Heaven's vengeance was again upon him, and he had but a second left in which to make confession.

'Yes, yes,' he cried trembling and quavering. 'I've been a villain. I've gone again' the laws o' God an' man. But I've straightened everythin', an' I didn't fight the case as I might ha' done, an' ha' cost my nevew Joseph a mint o' money, an' perhaps ha' won it after all.'

Was Heaven appeased, he wondered, by this confession. The awful mist began to clear away, and he could see again.

'I'm a old man,' he muttered, 'an' I ain't long for this world. Not long. An' I'll mek up for what I done as was wrong. I'll mek up for it, if I ain't drove too hard.'

Young George was silent, being more than a little frightened by the old man's looks, and the sudden change in him.

'Don't you be too hard o' me,' said old George tremulously. 'I don't know how I'm a-goin' to get hum,' and he began to whimper. 'You help me hum, Mr. Banks, an' I'll mek up for everythin'. I'll mek up for it, if I ain't

drove too hard. You help me hum, Mr. Banks.'

Young George, still a little in dread of the old man's sticks, and keenly watchful lest all this should be a *ruse*, approached him gingerly and took him by the arm. The poor old rascal was shaking like a leaf, and clutched weakly at his late private secretary. Considering the circumstances, the position was a curious one. The youngster, resolving to leave him at the end of the lane, and so to run no risk of being seen in this anomalous position, helped him on, and the other turned slowly over in that clouded and stiff-jointed mind of his the conviction that it was useless and dangerous to try to evade the powers of Heaven any longer. And being altogether crushed and broken by the assaults of accusing conscience, and filled with superstitious fears of what might happen unless he made some sort of atonement, he hit upon a plan, and groaned over it, so terrible did it seem, and yet resolved upon it. Some dim mingling of texts about doing good to them that despitefully use you, and denying

your own wishes—crucifying the desires—that was it—helped to the formation of this remarkable and dreadful resolution. The Bushell Hospital and Institution must go by the board, and he would divide his money equally—all that was left of it—between the man he had injured and the man who had robbed him, between Joe Bushell and this rascal of a late private secretary. It was a dreadful thing to think of, and the mere notion of it tugged at his very heartstrings, but surely, surely, it was all the more likely to be accepted on that account.

‘Can you get along alone now, sir?’ asked George the younger at the bottom of the lane.

‘I think I can,’ said George the elder, leaning on both his sticks again. ‘Don’t you be too hard o’ me, Mr. Banks, an’ I’ll mek up to you for all the harm I tried to do you.’

With that he tottered away, leaving his late *employé* smitten with bewilderment.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE day waned, a dreary wind blew up the clouds from the leaden horizon, the clouds discharged themselves in a miserable drizzling fall, but the sleepers in Bowker's house lay still and slept, with breathings light or heavy. Just as night was falling, Ethel's dreams carried her into the mine once more, and after long ages of waiting there she heard a scraping and rasping at the wall, and with a great shock of hope became suddenly awake. The noise resolved itself into the stirring of a fire below, and as she listened she could hear another sound which she was not slow to interpret—the sound, namely, of John Keen's voice in rapid undertoned speech. She arranged her hair and dress, and unwilling to disturb Dinah, who still slumbered, she opened the door with extreme quiet, and descended the steps which

led directly into the kitchen. Silently as she went, the one wakeful inmate of the kitchen heard her, and looked up. She saw his face in the firelight, and paused for a moment on the stairs, but recovering her self-possession, held on her way, and without a word, or a sign that she noticed George's presence, she passed him, and opening the door, looked out upon the wildly driving clouds and the bleak, darkened country.

Perhaps it was a part of what little good there was in him that young George, when he thought of Ethel, felt at his wickedest and least worthy. The thought of nobody else had such power to reproach him. And now, in spite of the sense of injury he had been nursing for the past two or three hours until the glowing coals had blazed with clear resentment, her presence suddenly put out the fire of wrath, and left him with a sick coldness at the heart. Ethel stood outside in the open door, raged at by sudden gusts of wind and beaten by storms of rain, but not heeding them or knowing of them. It could scarcely fail to

strike young George that he was in the way. It did so strike him, and he seized his hat and made for the road, but Ethel standing in the middle of the doorway, he found it necessary to speak to her.

‘Miss Donne,’ said young George shakily, and she turned. ‘I can only be a trouble to you if I stay. I have been watching poor Keen, but I shall not be wanted any longer now.’

She made room for him to pass, and as she did so he read rightly the shrinking of her figure to avoid the merest touch of contact of her garments with his. She had loved him, as he knew, most dearly, and now she loathed him so. That was his hideous ill-fortune—not his own fault at all? something seemed to ask within. His fault! he could but answer—Had he not been a villain all along? Had he ever been worthy to touch her, to be near her, to look at her? Was it any wonder that she hated him? He was hot, and cold, and sick, and dizzy all at once, as he thought of the scene in the magistrate’s office. But for

that, he would not have seemed to himself quite so much of a hound as now. He had nowhere to go to, and no money, and he was ashamed to show himself in the town, and certain that no one there would trust him for the value of one penny-piece after what had happened. So he wandered up and down outside the house in the rain, waiting till the rest should awake and go away, when he might make an appeal to his father and draw some small supplies. He had no hope of generosity in that quarter, and the future looked hard to him. He wove old George's promise into the tissue of his thoughts, and it helped him to the design of some curious patterns, but under existing circumstances the contemplation of the texture, howsoever its shifting patterns varied, gave him little comfort.

Meanwhile, Ethel lit a candle, and shading it carefully from the sick man's face, sat down to watch. John was murmuring, though he still slept, and again and again she heard her own name. Sometimes he spoke of her, and sometimes to her, but there was nothing else

in all his thoughts than her and her safety. He was still in the mine waiting for rescue, and once he opened his eyes, struggled into a half upright posture, and, unconscious of the hands that controlled her, called loudly for her.

‘She’s dead!’ he cried. ‘You’re hiding it from me. She’s dead.’

‘No, no,’ said Ethel, trying to soothe him. ‘Don’t you know me, Mr. Keen?’

He cried out again that she was dead, but by-and-by, being altogether weak and helpless, he permitted her to set him down and arrange his clothes and pillows, and after some few more cries and murmurings, which were all for her, he fell asleep. She sat watching him; his pale face, heavy eyelids, and tumbled curls of long hair looking ghostly in the shadow where he lay, and her whole heart was filled with a pitying admiration. Such a gallant, ready fellow he had been. So unobtrusively devoted, plotting in that quiet Wrethedale life to make her happy, and never permitting himself to be seen in it; loving her so all the time, and never

saying a word of it lest he should hurt her. To think of these things was to travel anew upon the beginning of a road you thought the road of folly, Ethel, and had vowed never again to set foot in. Ah! who knows of these things, or how they come? A longing to set foot in that road again? Scarcely as yet. But such a pity in her heart, and such a faith in the real manly honesty and truth of this poor wounded youngster as by-and-by may grow to that. And you shall not think my favourite maid unmaidenly, or sudden in having even made so small a step backwards towards love's demesne of glamour. To have waited four days and nights in face of death beside this true man who dearly loved her, and to have him chiefly to think of all the while, and him to nurse and soothe, and to hear him ever and always in his greatest pain and his most awful dreams calling on her name, to admire his courage and resource and hear them praised by all around, and to pity him with all her heart, was an education likely to move her swiftly if she moved at all.

She had sat for a long time watching and thinking, when a movement in the upper room and on the stairs attracted her attention, and Dinah appeared.

‘Where is he?’ whispered Dinah, blushing and trembling like a girl.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Ethel in the same cautious tone, ‘but there is someone in the next room. Listen. You can hear breathing.’

They listened, and heard the steady coming and going of a deep breath. Dinah crept to the door, and noiselessly opening it, looked in. The little parlour faced westward, and through the curtained windows she could see a great jagged line of pale yellow where the sun had gone down and the clouds were slowly severing, and in this faint and uncertain light, this line of pale yellow reflected into the room, she could just distinguish Joe’s figure from that of Cheston. She knelt down by his side, and looked at him with hungry heart and eyes, and yearned to throw herself upon his bosom and clasp him in her arms. She knew the story of his wanderings now, as well as Ethel and Sir

Sydney knew it. She knew old George's wicked tale of her second marriage, and somehow to Dinah's mind the two first years during which errant Joe had been silent were as nothing. She stooped and kissed his hand and let a tear fall upon it, but the sleeper never stirred. For those in danger there had been some little rest, for people do sleep in the face of death, and sleep calmly with blissful innocent dreams at times, but for him, since the first news came until a few hours ago, there had been no possibility of slumber. Seeing how wrapped in sleep he was, Dinah took courage and kissed his hand again, and since yielding to the impulse made it stronger, she slid her arm beneath his head and kissed his cheek very softly, and nestled down beside him, watching him until in the fast-gathering darkness his face was lost and she could only fancy it.

But after half-an-hour she rose and stole silently back to Ethel.

'Is there any news of *him*, my dear? Forgive me asking. Have you heard of him?'

‘Yes,’ said Ethel, whispering. ‘He was here an hour or two ago. He went out when I came down.’

The mother’s right was indisputable. Dinah could not be blamed for loving the child of her own body, but Ethel had yet to take herself to task for a half-inclination to think the love unreasonable. The very thought of young George grated on every nerve in her soul, and yet she knew, though with fear and self-reproach, that she was beginning to be happy again. The why and wherefore of this new contentment she either did not know or would not for a second acknowledge to herself.

Dinah passed like a ghost to the rearward door and looked out into the night. In a little while she heard a footstep, and as it came nearer she fluttered out into the darkness to meet it.

‘Is that you, George?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

‘Oh, George,’ she cried, ‘what are you out here for?’

‘I couldn’t stop in the house,’ he answered doggedly. ‘To remind everybody——’

He broke off abruptly and was silent.

‘You’re wet through,’ said Dinah, laying her hands upon him. ‘Don’t wait here, my dear. Go somewhere and get a change of clothes, and——’

‘I can’t get anything,’ George answered bitterly. ‘I haven’t got a penny in the world, and who would trust me?’

‘Oh, George,’ said Dinah, ‘I’ve plenty of money now. Mr. Keen sent me some money the day before we went down the pit, and I’ve got it with me. Here. Go to the hotel we stayed at in Birmingham, an’ have a glass of somethin’ warm afore you start. An’ let us know where you are, an’ O George, George! do try to be a good lad now. Won’t you, my darlin’—won’t you? an’ with God’s blessin’ we’ll be happy after all. Try to be a good lad again. Do, dear, do.’

She was embracing him again with tears, heedless of his rain-soaked garments.

‘I’ll try,’ said the wretched George, weeping also. ‘I don’t deserve your goodness. The best thing I could do for everybody would

be to make a hole in the water somewhere and rid the world of such a burden.'

There was even in the young man's mind a remote idea in favour of carrying this programme into execution, though there was probably little hope of the remote idea coming nearer. But it terrified Dinah.

'No, no, George,' she broke out, clinging to him.

'I'm a disgrace to everybody,' said George weeping. 'I'm in everybody's way.'

'No, George, no,' cried Dinah, and she clung to him still, and extorted from him solemn promises that he would live and be good; and at last, with an aching heart, she let him go, and watched his figure as it melted from her sight in the darkness.

She waited in the night a little while after this to compose herself, and then returned. Ethel was still keeping watch by John Keen, and all the sleepers in the little house were sound. The two women found themselves food and made tea, moving noiselessly. It was midnight when Cheston awoke with a great

yawn, and stumbled sleepily in to speak to them, but Joe still slept on, and Dinah, going to look at him, had terrible tremors about his never waking any more, until his regular heavy breathing reassured her. At one in the morning the Bowker family appeared, Mr. Bowker coming first in search for lucifer matches, the brewhouse fire having long since gone out.

‘Let him sleep, mister,’ said William. ‘He’s never closed a eye till this arternoon sence we heerd the news, an’ that’s more’n four nights and days ago.’

Having gone away to light the fire, he returned, and at Sir Sydney’s invitation, sat down. They talked in low voices in consideration of the patient, who was by this time sound asleep again, and there was little mystery in the story left before they had done with it. William had been told of uncle George’s gift of a hundred pounds to Joe, and the narration of it softened all hearts to the hard old man. He could not have begun to plot evil then, they thought, and could only have yielded to a sudden temptation. Mrs. Bowker made more

tea, and bringing it into the kitchen with her own hands, pressed it upon them ; and in the growing twilight they sat sipping together until a sound arose in the next room as of stretching and yawning, and a minute later Joe was amongst them. It was curious, and to everybody there a little touching, to notice the extreme diffidence with which the long-divided pair met each other. But by common consent room was made for Joe to sit next to Dinah, and by-and-by, as the others sat and talked, it was noticed that the silent two had stolen each a hand towards the other's, and thus in the chill growing twilight and the flickering light of the fire, they sat handed, looking at each other now and then, but quite wordless. It was broad daylight, though chill and dark even then, so lowering was the weather, when Miss Dorothea descended, and one of the younger branches of the house of Bowker being despatched for the Baronet's carriage, returned with it in the space of half-an-hour in triumph side by side with the coachman.

‘ I can get a cab and follow you afterwards,’

said Ethel, 'but until the doctor arrives I shall stay with Mr. Keen.'

Nobody ventured to offer any remonstrance except Cheston, who murmured something about being in Mr. Bowker's way.

'Not a bit of it, mister,' cried William. 'It meks the hearth brighter like to see her theer. A' my missis,' added Mr. Bowker, turning upon her, 'is as willin' as willin', but her's never been used to nursin' sick gentlefolks, an' it'll be as well to ha' one of his own sort along of him till the doctor's seen him again an' gi'en me orders about him.'

So they drove away in such uplifted silent thanksgiving of heart as no words of mine can tell, and Ethel was left behind with her wounded lover, whom she had not yet learned to love. Young Bowker called his mother and father from the room.

'Leave 'em to 'emsens,' he said. 'Whether he'll live or die theer's no saying', but all the while as we was down nothin' 'ud satisfy him but he must have her settin' next to him, an' he ho'din' her hand an' talkin' to her.'

‘Does her care for him?’ asked Mrs. Bowker.

‘I do’ know,’ her son answered; ‘but he cares for her. An’ all the time he’s been in the fever he’s been a-callin’ out, “Ethel, my love,” and “Ethel, my darlin’,” and sayin’, “I’m glad to die for you.” Wasn’t it her as was engaged to young Banks?’

‘Yis, yis,’ said his father. ‘But young Keen’s worth a hunderd million on him, an’ p’raps her’s a-findin’ that out. Leave ’em to ’emsens.’

Ethel, unconscious of the interest she excited, sat on still until the doctor came. No improvement yet. Had the patient been anyhow excited? No, they told him; he had even slept nearly the whole of the time since yesterday’s visit.

‘I am sorry to tell you,’ said the doctor to Miss Donne, ‘that I don’t like the look of things at all. I shall act on Sir Sydney’s instructions and call in a first-rate man from Birmingham.’

‘Do all you can,’ Ethel implored him. ‘He saved all our lives.’

‘What can be done shall be done,’ answered the doctor; and with that he went away.

‘He saved our lives,’ said Ethel to Mrs. Bowker. ‘Will you let me stay here till we hear the news—till the other doctor comes?’

‘Stay?’ said that good woman, ‘an’ welcome!’

So Ethel stayed, and the great local man arriving, gave a more decided and more favourable opinion than his country colleague. With care and attention the patient would probably recover. But the case was grave. The great man having delivered his verdict, went away again, promising to return on the morrow, and still Ethel waited. The lesser light of science, a sound reliable man of the old school, called twice or thrice during the day and found her always at her post. She sent a special messenger to Dinah explaining her purposes, and Dinah reading between the lines could not fail to think of George and the happiness and honour he had sacrificed. In brief, Ethel stayed beneath Mr. Bowker’s roof one week, and Sir Sydney made calls upon her twice with

Joe, and twice with Dinah. Before that time had expired John had recovered consciousness, and was believed to be fairly out of danger.

On the last night of Ethel's stay an interview occurred between John and her which probably accelerated her departure. The Bowker family were bivouacked in the parlour, feeling singularly abroad and un-at-home there, and Ethel and John were alone in the kitchen. The invalid lay in his improvised bed, propped up with pillows, his redundant curls all shorn, his eyes remarkably hollow, and his cheeks remarkably thin and pale. Ethel was preparing beef-tea for him, and his eyes, looking supernaturally large, followed her about the place with a pleased languor. When at last she brought it to him, he took the hand that held the cup, and showed no disposition to relinquish it. A very little violence would have released the hand, but who could be violent with an invalid, especially with an invalid whose valour and foresight had just saved so many lives.

“You are very kind to me,” John murmured,

holding the hand and the cup together in such a way that it was difficult to let the cup go without spilling its contents.

‘We have reason to be grateful to you, Mr. Keen,’ said Ethel. ‘All of us. We owe you our lives.’

‘I owe you mine in turn,’ said John, holding the hand a little tighter. ‘I knew you were about me all the while. Even when I was delirious I seemed to know it. I should have died without you. You don’t mind my loving you?’ demanded the unconventional young man.

Now, what possible answer could a young woman make to a question of that sort?

‘I couldn’t help it,’ John continued. ‘I loved you before I had known you a week. I wonder any fellow who ever saw you cares to look at another woman.’

‘You are weak, Mr. Keen,’ said Ethel, striving gently to release her hand. ‘You must not excite yourself by talking.’

She moved her disengaged hand to the tea-cup to steady it in the struggle, and the

insolent invalid absolutely took that also, and being really near a physical collapse, closed his eyes and dropped his head, but held on to the hands.

‘Let me give you your beef-tea,’ said Ethel.

‘If you won’t go away afterwards,’ said John.

‘I will stay,’ Ethel answered, and he released her, and for a while lay like one comatose, to her great dismay. But in a little time he rallied, and submitted to be fed with a spoon, and was extremely orderly and quiet until Ethel made a movement as if to rise.

‘No,’ said John feebly, and with one of the thin hands that lay outside the counterpane he caught one of hers, and taking it to his lips he mumbled it there feebly. ‘Let me cheat myself for a day or so till I get stronger,’ he said. ‘Don’t think ill of me. I’m very weak at present. I shall know better by-and-by.’

And he fell to kissing the hand so passionately that Ethel withdrew it straightway in fear for him, and half by virginal instinct.

‘Forgive me,’ said John humbly, and she pitied him so that she gave him the hand back again, and he closed both his upon it, and lay quite still in a sort of prostrated rapture.

‘I shall be sorry to get well again,’ quoth John after a pause.

‘Why, Mr. Keen?’ asked Ethel.

‘I shall leave this fool’s paradise when I’m better,’ said John with a tear born of weakness in each eye. ‘I’d rather die like this than live to part from you.’

She said nothing but turned and looked at him with a mournful pitying tenderness. He looked back at her straight into her eyes.

‘I love you,’ he said in a half-whisper, his lips scarcely moving. ‘I love you. I *do* love you!’

And Ethel never knew how it happened, but his eyes seemed in some strange way to draw her to him, and she stooped slowly over him and kissed him on the lips. John threw an arm about her neck and kissed her back again, with a vigour surprising in a man who had so lately had so many bones broken. She

struggled gently to be free of him, being half-afraid of him and wholly afraid of herself; but

‘Let me die like this,’ said John, and lying back again fell into a placid sleep.

When she was assured that he really was asleep the girl kissed him again. And it is remarkable that she was not yet sure she loved him. Only he was so handsome and so brave and good, and he had suffered so much, and she had such a pity for him and such an admiration.

But when in the course of two or three hours the invalid awoke, and of his own initiative desired beef-tea, he was absolutely beyond control, and insisted on kissing her fingers every time they approached his lips. And at last this shy young man’s insolence reached to such a pitch, encouraged doubtless by her non-resistance, that he said :

‘Ethel, kiss me.’ And so overcome was Miss Donne by this command that she obeyed him. ‘You won’t send me away when I get better, will you?’ asked John. ‘You’ll get to like me a bit, won’t you? You’ll let me go on loving you?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

And in this unexampled fashion was a modest, reticent, good girl, within little more than the space of two years, brought to be in love with two men, and to confess it to them both. She was angry at herself; she thought it unmaidenly; she called herself shallow-hearted, and even shed some secret tears over the phantom of that lost rascal George, who did still at times revisit the glimpse of the moon.

‘You are getting stronger now, Mr. Keen,’ said Miss Donne, ‘and I shall come and see you sometimes, but I must go back to Dinah in the morning.’

‘No,’ said John.

‘Yes, Mr. Keen,’ said Ethel. ‘I must go.’

‘Call me John,’ said the young man who had always until now been so shy and reticent. Ethel obeyed him, in a whisper. Then having secured that point, John besought her to stay a little longer, but in that respect she was adamant. But she promised to see him every day, and they took tender farewell of each other;

Ethel still distrustful and uncertain of herself, and full of maidenly shame at being so cheaply captured. She had vowed never to care for any man again, and yet he had suffered so, and was so good, and loved her so dearly. She did not quite love him yet, but only took pity on him, and John seemed tolerably contented with it. The doctors fairly stared at him next day, he made so much advance.

The youngest Bowker had been sent for a cab, and Ethel had gone away before either of the doctors came. She went straight, of course, to Cheston's house, and the Baronet came out to receive her as the cab drove up the avenue.

‘And how is the patient?’ he asked.

‘Better,’ returned Ethel, ‘much better. How is Mrs. Bushell, Sir Sydney?’

A shade came across the genial Baronet's face.

‘Miss Donne,’ he answered, ‘I don't know what to make of things in that quarter at all. You had better see her yourself.’

‘What is the matter?’ cried Ethel in alarm.

‘Lunacy’s the matter, according to the best of my belief,’ said Cheston testily, though he laughed a second later. ‘Go and see her.’

Ethel ran upstairs to Dinah’s room, and found her sitting there alone, looking pale and dejected.

‘Where is your husband, Dinah?’ asked the girl when the first greetings were over.

‘He’s staying at the hotel in Birmingham,’ said Dinah with tremulous lips. ‘He’s very kind and good, my dear, and he writes me beautiful letters, and he’s been here twice to see me, but——’ Dinah suppressed with effort an inclination to cry, and Ethel said indignantly,

‘Dinah, he ought to be ashamed of himself. Give up thinking about him, my dear.’

‘No, no,’ said Dinah. ‘You don’t understand.’

‘I don’t indeed,’ responded Ethel.

CHAPTER XXXV.

‘MY DEAR WIFE.’

Thus far Joseph Bushell, with a sheet of letter-paper otherwise blank before him. Joe sat in his own room in the Birmingham hotel and bit disconsolately at the feather of his pen. A letter of Dinah's lay before him, and whenever he took it up and looked at it, as he did often, a swelling arose in his throat, and he found it necessary to get up and pace about the room a little to recover himself. The gist of Dinah's letter was simply this. Let the past bury its dead. I am your faithful and loving wife now just as much as when you went away. Don't desert me again, or you will break my heart. The letter said these things over and over again, but it contrived to say little more.

‘She must know something more of me,’ said Joe, pacing up and down the room, ‘before

I can ask her to accept me again as her life companion. She ought to be sure of me. And I feel,' he murmured to the walls, 'I feel as if we ought to be married again, as if a return to her were somehow an attack upon her purity. We ought to be married again. It isn't bigamy I suppose,' said Joe with a wretched little grin, 'to be married twice to one's own wife. I suppose it's legal. Cheston says young Keen is getting strong again. I'll go and ask young Keen's advice.'

So he shoved all his papers, loose and crumpled, into a writing-desk, locked them up, took his hat, and set out upon his journey. The day was bright and cheerful after recent rains, and a spring-like feeling was in the air. Nobody is entirely insensible to such influences, and they were strong on Joe Bushell as he walked sturdily on again in the month of spring. Spring came again and seemed to bring some promise of a new spring of life for Dinah and for him. In spite of all the self-accusations he had written to her, in spite of the self-accusing things he had said to her, Dinah would and

could see nothing in Joe's prolonged absence but the result of Uncle George's wickedness.

‘If you'd ha' been fortunate, Joe,’ she had said to him, ‘and had made enough to keep me afore he wrote that wicked letter, wouldn't you ha' sent for me, or come back to me?’

And he had been compelled to answer ‘Yes,’ though he strove to inculcate himself by showing that he had acted like a fool and like a coward, to all of which Dinah lent an unbelieving ear. And the more Joe accused himself, the more eager Dinah was to believe the best of him; and the worst things he said of himself, the better man she thought him. For he could but tell her that, wickedly and basely as he had acted, he had been true to her in heart and life, and that was enough for Dinah. A hard and cruel fate, with old George as the controller of it, had come between them; that was all, and she had no blame for Joe. Not even now, when his scruples were again dividing them, and when she would have taken him back with her whole heart and soul, could she blame him. Fate was hard and always had been hard,

but Joe was not to blame. 'Commend me to my kind lord,' said Desdemona with her dying breath; and if Joe Bushell had turned Othelloish in act and fancy, Dinah would probably have had no harsher farewell for him. This is in the nature of women sometimes, and if it leads to misery it breeds happiness as well, such happiness perhaps as a heart otherwise put together can never know, or do more than dream of.

As Joe walked on his spirits rose higher and higher. He had no fear of his own faith for the future. Whatever happened he would be true to Dinah, and would guard her so gently that the end of her life should be sweet to her. Only, a little pause, for the sake of the delicacy of his own thoughts about her, seemed necessary; a new courtship—they had been so long apart—a new ceremonial of some sort to bring them together again, to renew a tie so strained and weakened by the lapse of time that it felt to him a thing broken and faded almost into nothing.

The road he took led him for some four

and a half miles over the ground he had travelled when he walked to catch the London train at almost the beginning of this story, and the way was changed, as he was. There were new landmarks on the road, as there were new landmarks in his history, and many of the old ones were clean gone, as in his history likewise. And since he walked now, not in the old direction, but retracing those youthful steps, this special present journey seemed to have a special promise in it, as if it were only now that he was really coming back again to love and duty.

It is not at all an unusual thing for two or even three people to come to a resolution on the same day, and almost at the very moment when Joe resolved upon a visit to John Keen, old George Bushell set out upon a visit to the convalescent lawyer. And the history of old George's visit was briefly this: The hand of Heaven in judgment had seemed to his wicked superstitious old soul to weigh so heavily upon him, and the way of disarming its vengeance seemed so clear, that within a day or two of his

interview with his whilom private secretary, he had sent a note to Mr. Packmore, requesting that gentleman's presence at a settled hour. At the settled hour Mr. Packmore came, and learned that he had been sent for to alter George's will, and learning, further, in what direction the alteration was proposed, was greatly disturbed, and became so doubtful of old George's sanity that he refused, after a lengthy squabble, to have anything to do with the matter.

'My money's mine, ain't it?' asked old George of his stubborn counsellor.

'And my reputation is mine, sir,' returned Mr. Packmore stiffly. 'And my professional probity is mine, sir. And I will have nothing to do with a scheme which seems to me, sir, to be no less than crackbrained.'

'I didn't send for you o' purpose to be insulted, Packmore,' said old George, with a dignity more wooden even than of old. 'An' I'll tell you what. You send me all the business dockuments you got o' mine, an' send your bill in, an' I'll send a cheque an' ha' done

wi' you. Talk to me about bein' crack-brained !' he quavered, getting on his legs and shaking both his sticks at the conveyancer ; ' I'm as sound i' my mind as iver I was, thank God, an' *I* know what I'm a-doin'. But I don't want no unwillin' service, an' I don't want no reflections on my intellec', thenk you.' An' you can get out o' my house, an' send my dockyments at your earliest convenience.'

Mr. Packmore at this had bowed with exceeding stiffness and retired. And now old George, after new cogitations, had bethought him of John Keen, who knew the whole story (which it was not easy to tell to Mr. Packmore), and who would know his reasons, and would make his will in this amended fashion without misgiving. He let the time slip by, however, until falling into a state of querulous rage with Mrs. Bullus one day, he felt a recurrence of his old pains and terrors, and went off headlong on his two sticks to seek the lawyer.

' Is Mr. Keen well enough to see a body ? ' he asked of Mrs. Bowker.

‘He’s a-sittin’ up a-readin’,’ said that estimable woman, who for reasons of her own had no affection for old George, and answered him somewhat scornfully.

‘Is he well enough to see a body?’ demanded George again.

‘I’ll ask him,’ returned Mrs. Bowker disappearing. ‘You can come in,’ she said ungraciously when she returned; and old George, entering, found himself face to face with the lawyer, who was sitting up in bed in the parlour, propped with pillows, and looking like a rakish ghost in a smoking cap, which set so much to the side of his head that it totally obscured one ear. The smoking-cap had fitted him once upon a time, but now that his locks were so closely shorn it was ridiculously too big for him.

‘Be you well enough to do a minute or two’s talk on important business, Mr. Keen?’ asked old George.

‘Yes,’ said John, ‘I think so. Take a seat.’

Mrs. Bowker slammed the door and went

out, repenting herself a moment later on account of the invalid. Old George began to unfold his purpose slowly.

‘Mr. Keen,’ he said, ‘I’m come to you because you know everythin’ appertainin’ to me an my lung-lost nevew, Joseph, an’ my late private seckitary, knowed beforetime as George Banks.’

‘Yes,’ said John.

‘It’s been o’ my mind,’ said old George, ‘as I might ha’ acted straighter than I did, an’ what I did as was wrong I want to mek up for.’

‘Yes,’ said John again.

‘I’m a-gettin’ main old now,’ George renewed, ‘an’ I feel as if I wa’n’t lung for this world. And I want to do right afore I leave it.’

‘I am very glad to hear you speak in this way, Mr. Bushell,’ said John, in whom his recent illness and danger had left many grave thoughts behind them. ‘Your coming here,’ he added, seeing that old George paused nervously, ‘seems to indicate that I can be of use to you. Can I?’

‘Yes,’ returned old George. ‘But gi’ me time ; gi’ me time.’ He sat for a moment or two, with a hand on either stick quavering there. ‘I allays meant to be respectable an’ a God-fearin’ man. An’ I gien my nevew Joseph a hunderd pound to run away wi’, an’ I’ve niver been hard—not over an’ above—wi’ the poor. An’ what wrong-doin’ I fell into, Mr. Keen, I have been sore punished for, an’ I want to mek things straight again, an’ die wi’ a clean conscience.’ There he paused again and looked up at John with an uncertain glance easily abashed. ‘I’m a-goin’,’ he continued, ‘to have a noo will made, I am, an’ I’m a-goin’ to leave everythin’ equal divided betwixt my nevew Joseph an’ my late private seckitary, knowed beforehand as George Banks. Everythin’ equal divided betwixt them two.’

There was a something in old George’s manner which John construed rightly as conveying an expectation that he would be surprised at this and would applaud it as a moral action.

‘I had always heard,’ said John, ‘that it

was your intention to found an institute and hospital. That was never made a secret.'

It never had been, and that fact made it none the easier for old George to satisfy affrighted conscience and angry Heaven.

'Such was my intention, Mr. Keen,' said he, 'but I'm now bended on another course, so to speak. Will you carry out them theer instructions?'

'Certainly, Mr. Bushell,' returned John. 'Assuredly, if you wish it so. Do you attach any conditions?'

'No,' said old George, 'no conditions. Divided equal betwixt 'em,' with a heavy sigh; 'that's all. Folk's 'll talk, I count, but I've got my peace to mek wi' Them Above, Mr. Keen, an' I'm a-gettin' main old, an' I ain't been all I should ha' been, an' I'm a good deal broke wi' trouble, an' I don't look to last lung.'

'I believe, Mr. Bushell,' said John, 'that you are trying to do what seems to you to be a duty, and I can understand how hard it is. But you will have the sympathy of all who

understand your motives ; and as for those who don't, what matter ? ’

‘ Ah,’ said old George, ‘ what matter, indeed. These things is betwixt a man an’ his conscience. I don’t want to hurry you, for it’s plain to be seen as you’re still sickly. But as soon as you can, Mr. Keen, as soon as you can.’

Old George, when John really came to look at him and in his own mind to contrast him with what he had been, was wonderfully changed and pitifully broken, insomuch that the wrong-doer extracted a sharp twinge of pity from the honest man.

‘ It’s the meanest proverb ever put in print,’ thought John to himself, ‘ but it’s true for all that—Honesty is the best policy.’

Old George did not seem to have anything to add to the instructions he had already given, but he sat with somewhat stertorous breathing, and looked at the pattern of the gaudy carpet, pushing one of his shaky sticks about it as if he followed the design. He had not sat thus silent for a minute when a tap came to the door.

‘ I’m a-goin’ now, Mr. Keen,’ said George,

‘an’ I can open your door for you. Good-bye. You send word to me when you’re ready, will you?’

John promised, and the old fellow crawled forward leaning on his two sticks, and shufflingly set both of them in one hand whilst he opened the door. And there before him stood a bearded man of middle age whom he did not know. But the bearded man knew him, and to his terror and amazement said very quietly :

‘My uncle George.’

Uncle George showing no sign of any inclination to move, the new-comer passed him and closed the door. Then, with his hands in his jacket pockets, he turned and confronted uncle George, and looked at him up and down.

‘Be you my nevew Joseph?’ asked George in his shaky voice. He knew it well enough now, though he had not recognised him at first.

Joe could not trust himself as yet to say a word in the presence of this old traitor. There were too many terrible thoughts revived by the sight of him, and too great a spirit of

natural vengeance stirred to make speech seem safe.

‘I’m a-tryin’ to put everythin’ straight again as I set crooked, Joseph,’ said George, his eyes sinking before his nephew’s gaze. ‘I own I acted bad towards you, but I’ve been punished for it heavy. Heavy, Joseph. An’ I’m a-tryin’ wi’ God’s help to straighten things out a bit.’

‘We’re a very pretty family,’ said Joe with great bitterness, speaking to himself. ‘I can see that you’re better, Keen,’ he continued in a changed voice, turning towards John, ‘I had something to say to you. I’ll call again when you are disengaged.’

‘I’m a-goin’ now,’ quavered uncle George. ‘I’ve been a-tryin’ to straighten things, Joseph. You ask lawyer Keen if I ain’t been a-trying to straighten things.’

Joe made no response to this, and Uncle George began to fumble at the door again. He shook so, and went about the simple business in such a helpless fashion, that Joe turned the handle for him.

‘Thank you, Joseph,’ said the old fellow, turning his fishy eyes upon him shiftily. ‘I meant well by you at the beginnin’. I give you a hunderd pound to run away wi’, an’ I meant well by you at the beginnin’. But I was tempted sudden, Joseph, an’ I’ve been a bad man, I’m afeard. But I’m a-trying to set things straight again.’

Joe said nothing, and Uncle George with much difficulty made off. His nephew closed the door behind him.

‘Is that the first time you’ve seen him since you left England?’ asked John.

Joe nodded gravely, and drew up a chair to the bedside.

‘When do you think you’ll be about again, Keen?’ he asked after a pause.

‘Well,’ said John, ‘I want to get up now, and feel quite equal to it, but the doctors won’t have it. I suppose they’re right,’ he added with a sigh.

‘You know what we all owe you,’ said Joe.

‘You know what we all owe *you*,’ returned John.

‘Keen,’ said Joe suddenly, ‘I want to speak to you upon a delicate matter. My wife and I are absolutely reconciled.’

‘I am heartily glad of it,’ answered John. ‘Heartily glad.’

‘But we are still divided by a—by a sentiment, I suppose I must call it. We have been so long apart. Is a second marriage a legal possibility?’

‘A possibility,’ said John, ‘yes. But not a necessity.’

‘If a possibility,’ answered Joe, ‘certainly a necessity.’

‘As satisfying the sentiment you spoke of?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you feel the necessity, you might get a clergyman to read the service through; dispensing with the purely legal formalities.’

‘Yes,’ said Joe. ‘They are not needed, of course.’

‘Not at all.’

A knock at the inner door made an interruption here, and Mrs. Bowker entered. Mrs. Bowker was sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Keen

must have beef-tea and toast at this juncture, punctually at midday.

‘There’s the clock a-strikin’,” said Mrs. Bowker in great triumph, as indicating her own precision of obedience to the doctor’s orders.

Mr. Keen was of opinion that he could help himself with perfect ease, but Mrs. Bowker would not hear of it, and insisted upon feeding the patient with her own hands. So John being comfortably tucked into a clean towel, a little coarse in material but of snowy whiteness, was fed with provoking slowness by his hostess. Mrs. Bowker was of opinion that the measures taken with the rescued were still necessary, and so made great pauses between each spoonful, and took eager observations of the patient, as if in expectation of asphyxial symptoms.

‘Let me drink it up,’ said John. ‘I want to talk with Mr. Bushell.’

‘Health’s o’ more importance than any amount o’ talkin’, an’ I’m sure Mr. Bushell don’t want to see you a-gorgin’ yourself to talk to *him*,’ said Mrs. Bowker.

Joe laughed and said, 'Certainly not,' and the slow process went on. When in the course of a half-hour it was finished, Mr. Keen's hands and face must be sponged with luke-warm water, and his beard combed and brushed to make him presentable to the doctor.

'An' somebody else as we knowin' on—eh, Mr. Keen?' said the hostess knowingly.

At this sally John blushed and laughed, and the sound of wheels being heard at that moment, Mrs. Bowker laughed triumphantly, whisked to the door and opened it, and a minute later admitted Ethel. The girl came in beaming, but stopped short at the sight of Joe, and gave him a frozen little nod.

'I'll call again, Keen,' said Joe, shaking hands with the patient. 'I'll look in again this afternoon.'

'Do,' said John heartily, but perhaps not sorry to be alone with Ethel. 'I shall be glad to see you.'

Joe bowed to Ethel (who responded by another frozen little nod), and went his way.

'My darling!' cried John—they had got

so far by this time—‘you do him less than justice.’

‘Why,’ cried Ethel, with a flush of warm indignation, ‘does the worthless fellow stand shilly-shallying here when the best woman in the world is waiting and breaking her heart for him, and he knows it?’

John admired her all the more, if that were possible, for this outbreak, but he said only :

‘Shall I tell you why?’

‘If there is a reason,’ said Ethel a little disdainful still, ‘I should like to hear it.’

‘There is a reason,’ answered John. ‘They have been so long apart that he feels some sort of formal ratification of their old union necessary before they begin life together again. He wants some new solemnity between them to piece the tie so long broken.’

‘They are man and wife,’ cried Ethel.

‘Legally, of course, they are,’ John answered, patting one of her hands with his. ‘But you can understand the sense of division which has come upon him. Think more gently of him, darling. Think of what we owe him.’

‘It was you who saved us all,’ she protested.

‘You would have found my help worth very little,’ John said gravely, ‘if it had not been for his.’

‘Is he going back to Dinah?’

‘Yes. But I have a scheme in my own mind which I am going to propose to him when he comes this afternoon.’

‘What is it?’

‘It depends on you.’

‘On me?’

‘On you.’

‘What is it?’ she asked again.

John, leaning nearer on his pillows, whispered his scheme to her. She heard him out, and answered, ‘No.’

‘Not for Dinah’s sake as well as mine?’ pleaded John, who evidently set great store by this scheme of his.

‘No,’ she said again, but in a way which was scarcely negative.

‘It is the very thing,’ said John with cheerful emphasis, ‘the very thing.’ And with those wiles which happy lovers use he pressed his case until at last she yielded.

‘May I tell him?’

‘I suppose he must know,’ she answered with a pleasant confusion.

‘I suppose so,’ said John, with a look of exultation on his face. ‘Will you wait till he returns and take the news to Dinah?’

‘Yes,’ she answered; and he, opening his arms for her, she arose, and stooped and kissed him. The eyes of both were moist with the dew of happiness as they sat and looked at each other, a moment later, hand in hand.

‘Do you know, John,’ she said after a blissful pause, ‘I am almost sorry for that wicked old man, hard as he has been.’

‘Old Bushell?’ asked John.

‘Yes. I should have been earlier here this morning if I had not met him upon the way. Sir Sydney’s coachman was very near driving over him upon the road, and he seemed quite helpless. He knew the coachman, and asked if he would drive him home, and said he felt quite unable to walk. Of course I asked him to get into the carriage, but the man and I had to help him. I wanted to leave him there and

walk on, but he was evidently so ill that I was afraid to do it. So we took him home and waited until the doctor came. And whilst I waited he told me what he had been out for. I really think he wants to do what seems to be his duty now. It seems only the other day since he was a stout healthy man, and now what a wreck he is! He cried in quite a pitiful way whilst he was talking, and he seemed to cling to me so, because I pitied him and spoke kindly to him. He begged me so hard to go and see him again that I couldn't help promising. I had meant to call again this afternoon, but I must lose no time in carrying back this news to Dinah.'

There she blushed a little, and drooped the hazel eyes into which John looked so proudly and so fondly.

'Yes,' said John, 'he's nearly broken. He's been a terrible old rogue, but he has suffered for it. It was like parting with his soul to lose the money he had held so long.'

'I don't think he can live long, John. I asked him to see a clergyman, but he said

“No, no. You come an’ talk about good things to me. You’ll do me more good than a parson.”’

‘So you will,’ said John.

And there again, as happy lovers will, and as they have a right to, they fell to talking of their own affairs. Joe meantime rambled lonely, but not downhearted now, and gave God thanks humbly, and with deep penitence and lofty longings towards the future. In two hours’ time he returned to the cottage, and finding Ethel still there would have retired again, but John forbade him, and called him in. Then, Ethel having joined Mrs. Bowker in the kitchen, John summoned his visitor to the seat she had vacated.

‘Bushell,’ he said, ‘congratulate me. I am going to be married.’

‘I congratulate you with all my heart,’ said Joe; and added, ‘When?’

‘As soon as I am well enough, and everything can be arranged.’ He laughed weakly in his joy and triumph and held out a hand. Joe grasped it, and he continued, ‘The one creature

dearest in the world to your wife next to you is my wife that is to be.'

'I know as much,' said Joe.

'And Ethel has consented to this haste,' said John, 'on condition that you take our wedding-day as yours.'

Joe bent his head, and bringing up a second hand to the young lawyer's, gripped it hard in both of his without a word.

'That contents you?'

'Yes.'

'Call Ethel,' said John, dropping back upon his pillows with a tired but happy look.

Joe obeyed.

'It is settled, my darling,' said John. 'Ride away and tell Dinah.'

'May I come with you?' asked Joe, blushing like a schoolboy, but looking in her face with candid eyes.

'Come,' answered Ethel brightly, 'and secure her consent yourself.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

‘LET me go first,’ said Ethel, as she and Joe drove up the avenue at Worley Hall together, ‘and make her ready for you.’ And Joe assenting, she left him with Sir Sydney in the library whilst she ran away to find Dinah. ‘My darling,’ she cried, throwing both arms about her friend’s neck, ‘I have such news for you.’ Dinah was not eager to ask the news, but Ethel whispered to her, ‘My dear, your husband is here and is waiting to see you. No. don’t run away yet. I have something else to tell you.’

She had yielded to John’s solicitations, and in her new-found happiness that had seemed an easy thing enough to do. But now she had to recall the fact, never very easy to forget, that she and Dinah’s son had once been affianced lovers, and not so long ago. And yet Dinah

knew as well as she did how much she was indebted to her new lover; by what singular bonds of pity and gratitude she had found herself tied to him.

‘Dinah, I am going to be married.’

‘Yes, darlin’,’ said Dinah; ‘to Mr. Keen?’

‘Yes. We are going to be married directly he gets well again. And so are you.’ Dinah looked helpless at this extraordinary statement, and Ethel explained it. ‘My dear, I have seen more of your husband to-day than I ever saw of him before, and I begin to like him and believe in him—a little. And now that I know why he has been staying away from you, I esteem his reason for it, hard as it seemed at first.’ She told the reason. ‘And now, Dinah,’ she said gaily, ‘your old sweetheart has come a-courting again.’ But there the gaiety suddenly broke down, and the two women had a cry together, though they were very tender and joyful tears that fell.

Then in a little while Dinah descended to meet Joe, and waited for him in a small drawing-room looking on the garden. Ethel went

to the library, and having returned with him, fled, and left the two together.

‘You know why I have been waiting, Dinah?’

‘Yes, Joe.’

‘And you will take me back again?’

‘Joe! My own husband!’

They embraced and kissed each other, and sat there talking for hours, until Sir Sydney came in and roused them. Then, the evening being fine and bright, they walked in the garden together after dinner, like lovers, with their arms stolen shyly round each other, in dusky walks where none could see them, and at night, with a tender farewell, Joe went away to the town again, but only to return next day and sit and talk the day out alone with Dinah, and wander about the gardens in the evening again with an arm wound lover-like about her waist as they wandered in dusky walks unnoticed. And then again farewell for the night. A singular courtship, but full of a complete forgiveness on the one side and a complete penitence on the other, and bidding fair to lead—if ever

courtship led yet—to a happy union. Sometimes these lovers talked of their unhappy son, and planned for his future, and he was the only blot upon their hopes of happiness.

‘Could you bear, my dear,’ asked Joe, ‘to leave England and go abroad with him and me to some place where our whole story is unknown, where he would have a new chance for amendment?’

‘Anywhere with you an’ him, Joe,’ answered Dinah. ‘Anywhere.’

‘I’ll talk it over with him,’ said Joe; ‘I think it best. Here the memory of the past may weigh him down and keep him hard and sullen. And perhaps, my dear, between prosperity and our watchfulness and affection he may mend.’

‘Don’t be too hard upon him, in your mind, Joe,’ said Dinah, pleadingly.

‘I have no right to be hard in my thoughts on any man,’ Joe answered sadly.

‘He was never a bad lad,’ said poor Dinah, ‘till he got into that money-lending lawyer’s hands and was tempted beyond his strength.’

‘Then we will go abroad together, and try for the best?’

‘Yes, dearest. Anywhere with you and him,’ said Dinah, and the thing was settled.

So next day Joe sought his son and found him. Dinah’s purse had contained no less than fifty pounds, and the young gentleman was once more in clover. He was living in a highly respectable hotel in private rooms, had already set up another suit of clothes, and on his father’s unexpected entry to his sitting-room was seated with his heels upon the low chimney-piece with a cigar in his mouth and a sporting paper in his hands. Beholding the new comer, he arose embarrassed, and murmured something about waiting for instructions, and not knowing what to do without them.

‘I am here to give you instructions,’ said his father. ‘For God’s sake, man, go on smoking, and don’t try to hide your cigar from me. Your mother and I,’ he continued in a changed tone, ‘are going to the colonies, where our curious story will be unknown. We think it better that you should accompany us. I have

been talking things over with your mother, and I want to treat you kindly and to be your friend. There will be no temptations in the life before you unless you make them. Try to mend, my lad: try to mend your life and your mother's heart together. She has been unhappy in both of us. Let us try together to make atonement. You shall hear no more reproaches as to your past so long as you behave reasonably and give no cause for new offence. And I will try to do my duty by you, and will be as kind and good a father as you will let me be. Will you come with us?'

'Yes, sir,' said young George with bent head.

'What money have you?'

'My mother gave me this,' answered George, producing his purse and spreading its contents upon the table.

'You are not happy here, are you? So near the——?' he paused, and George's head bent lower.

'No, sir. I had rather be elsewhere.'

'Go to Southampton and await us there.'

When you want money write to me, not to your mother. To attempt to draw one penny from her without my knowledge is to forfeit my protection and your own prospects. And that—I hope—is my last threat to you. Shake hands. Good-bye. Keep watch upon yourself, and try to be a decent fellow henceforward. Good-bye.'

And he was gone.

'I *will* try,' cried the wretched young George, when left alone. 'I will be a decent sort of fellow.'

Joe went back to Dinah and told her all he had said and undertaken, and the quaintly tender courtship went on again. They planned, like common lovers, for their future life, and like common lovers looked forward to their wedding-day. Sometimes they went to see John Keen, and day by day they found him growing stronger. Sir Sydney pressed for the wedding to take place from his house, but Mrs. Donne was too shy to present herself there, and Daniel had no other nurse than her, and seemed likely very soon to be in want of no nurse at all. He had no memory of any-

thing and no knowledge of what went on about him, missed nobody, sank swiftly, swiftly to his final setting, poor old earthly luminary, who had kept hearts warm in his time.

Ethel had redeemed her promise to call upon old George, and at his request had read the Bible to him; the broken and defeated old rascal taking his breakage and defeat for penitence, as other people have done. He was harmless now to everybody, quite a scotched snake, and was gentle and forbearing even with Mrs. Bullus. When John was well enough to get out to him, he called with a draft of the will, and having read it, bethought him of the housekeeper.

‘She has been a good servant, Mr. Bushell,’ he ventured to say.

‘I forgot her. I forgot her,’ said old George eagerly. ‘Put her down for summat handsome. Fifty pound a year payable from the estate. That’s handsome, ain’t it, eh? I want to do right by everybody. I’m afraid I’ve been a hard man in my time, Mr. Keen. I want to straighten everythin’ out afore I go.

Is theer anythin' else as you can think on, eh ?'

John himself was weak yet, and the journey to old George's threw him back a day or two. He lived on at Bowker's cottage, and declared stoutly that he would only leave it to be married, a declaration highly approved of by the coally William and his wife.

It used to be a curious sight, and not without its pathetic side, to see Ethel and old George together, she reading and he listening, for all the world as if he were a child again.

'Good words, bain't 'em, Miss Donne?' old George would say. 'I wish I'd ha' paid more heed to em' when I was younger.'

He failed and broke so rapidly, and was so conscious of it, that he asked the doctor one day in Ethel's presence :

'Now you tell me straight out, and don't you be afeard to speak the truth, because I've made my peace with Them Above, an' I'm ready when my time comes—How long do you gi'e me? How many days?'

‘Come, come,’ said the doctor, ‘you mustn’t talk in this way.’

‘But I must talk i’ this way,’ old George protested. ‘How many days?’

‘That is in other hands than ours,’ said the doctor. ‘I can’t say.’

‘Shall I iver get off o’ this here bed again alive?’ The doctor was silent. ‘That’s enough. My dear, I should like to see my newew Joseph an’ his wife, an’ mek my peace wi’ em, if they’ll be that good.’

‘They will come if you desire it, I am sure.’

‘Write a note and send a cab with it,’ he answered, and almost immediately he fell asleep.

‘Is he as near the end as he believes?’ asked Ethel.

‘I am afraid,’ said the doctor, ‘that it is but a question of a few hours.’

Ethel wrote the note and sent it away, and in less than two hours the cab returned bearing Joe and Dinah.

‘That’s them,’ cried the old man, who was

awakened by the sound of wheels. 'That's my nevew Joseph.'

'Yes,' said Ethel, looking from the window. 'They are here.'

She went out to meet them, and prepare them for the change in old George's condition. They entered softly and stood by his bedside.

'Nevew Joseph,' said Uncle George, 'you can forgive a dyin' man as asks for your forgiveness?'

'We are all too much in need of one another's mercy,' said Joe gently. 'Whatever wrongs you did me, I forgive.'

'An' you, missis?' said Uncle George looking up at Dinah.

'Oh yes, poor soul, with all my heart,' she said.

'Theer's more than you know on to forgive,' said George feebly. 'You see that theer mahogany chest o' drawers, my dear'—addressing Ethel.

'Yes.'

'I' the left-hand little drawer you'll find a

bunch o' keys.' She found them. 'The biggest on 'em opens that theer wardrobe.'

'Yes.' She opened it, and stood awaiting him.

'Do you see an old light overcoat a hangin' up?' he demanded huskily from the bed.

'Yes,' she said again.

'Bring it to me.' She brought it, a decayed and mildewed garment of a light fine cloth, lined with a faded watered silk and having a blotched and faded collar of the same.

'It was my nevew Joseph's coat,' he said, reaching out a feeble hand for it. 'I found it 'ears an' 'ears after he'd gone away, after you come to me, missis.' Dinah nodded to signify that she understood. 'Theer was a certificate o' your marriage in the linin', an' I found that an' I burned it, God forgi'e me. Yes, I burned it, Joseph. That was my wicked crime.'

'God forgive you for it,' said Joe.

'God forgive you for it as I do,' said Dinah.

'That's my—last—confession,' said old George. He had been speaking with feebler

and still feebler breath all through, and now it seemed to fail him. 'You do forgive me? Both of you?'

'With all my heart,' said Joe.

'And you too, missis?'

'Poor dyin' fellow-creature, yes,' cried Dinah weeping. 'With all my heart.'

'Stay till it's all o'er wi' me,' old George besought Ethel, and she promised.

But there was not long to stay, for almost as she spoke he gave one long, long sigh and never breathed again. There was nobody to grieve greatly at his going, but the women were a good deal moved for the moment. Joe attended the funeral, and John Keen, who was by this time well enough to attend without danger, read the will in the presence of a few witnesses, who all heard it with amazement. Young George was apprised of his fortune and came up from Southampton to see about it. And since I am in something of a hurry to be rid of young George, and have for the most part done with his adventures, I may as well anticipate a little and dismiss him here. In a

certain Australian weekly journal I saw a case the other day in which a youngster was reported as having undergone his preliminary trial before the magisterial bench on a charge of forgery. And the magistrate, who behaved apparently with a long-winded dignity and had a good deal of the talking to himself, bore the name of George Bushell. George is highly respected, keeps a carriage and good horses, and is, I am told, likely enough to be married one of these early days. This is a world in which singular awards are sometimes made, and is not governed always on the plan of the fictionist, who has it in his power to bless the good with wealth and happiness and to beat the evil—to rescue Marguerite and find a warm corner for Mephistopheles. But the way of the world is ordered otherwise, and it is not only the magnanimous, the gentle, and the good who prosper in it.

And now there rises over Wrethedale town that sun of early summer whose happy lot it is to look on youth and beauty wedded to worth

and love. A charming morning, and the birds all wild with mirth. Sir Sydney Cheston rises betimes from his bed in the little hotel, and bedecks himself as gaily as if he were the bridegroom, for it is his to give the bride away, and this being his first experience in that line, and the bride and bridegroom being both special favourites of his, he is anxious to do justice to the part. John Keen is up betimes also in the next room, and Sir Sydney hears him singing, a little crow-like, for John is no great vocalist, but blyther than lark or linnet. Miss Donne and Mrs. Donne are also up betimes, and what with the plaiting of hair and putting on of apparel, and the kissing and crying which ensue at intervals, find their hands full. Joe, sitting in *his* room in the little hotel, can hear John's strident melody, and feels his heart go out to the young fellow, yet can scarce help a touch of sadness to think his own son should have lost the prize, and so well deserved to lose it. But he counts himself, all in all, the most blessed of men, the least deserving and most gently dealt with, and his heart is

full. Dinah, in her own little house, makes breakfast ready for old Daniel, and feeds him, and tucks him comfortably in his great arm-chair, and then goes in to assist at Ethel's decoration—she, too, with some sad thoughts amidst all her gladness and her thankfulness.

In due time John goes down to the church, alone, and kicks his heels about in the vestry, regarding his hat with some disfavour, and as a blot upon the day. For John's redundant locks have not yet fully grown again, and the hat to its owner's mind looks pinched and small. Sir Sydney has scouted the idea of being married in a wide-awake as altogether heathen and unheard-of, and the present article is John's first possession in the conventional stove-pipe form. In a while, quietly and afoot, and with no bridal veil, comes Ethel on Sir Sydney's arm, her mother following, and Joe and Dinah bringing up the rear.

Joe and Dinah halted at the porch.

'Have you the ring, my darling?' Joe asked, and Dinah slid from her finger the

wedding-ring young Joe had placed there so many years before.

They entered the church together and sat down in a dark old-fashioned pew beneath the gallery. A tender rain of tears fell from Dinah's eyes, and Joe sat silent, with bent head. They waited thus for a while, until Dinah stole her hand into his and he stooped and kissed it.

A little later came the sound of footsteps, and a voice was heard :—

‘ I require and charge you both, as ye shall answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed—’

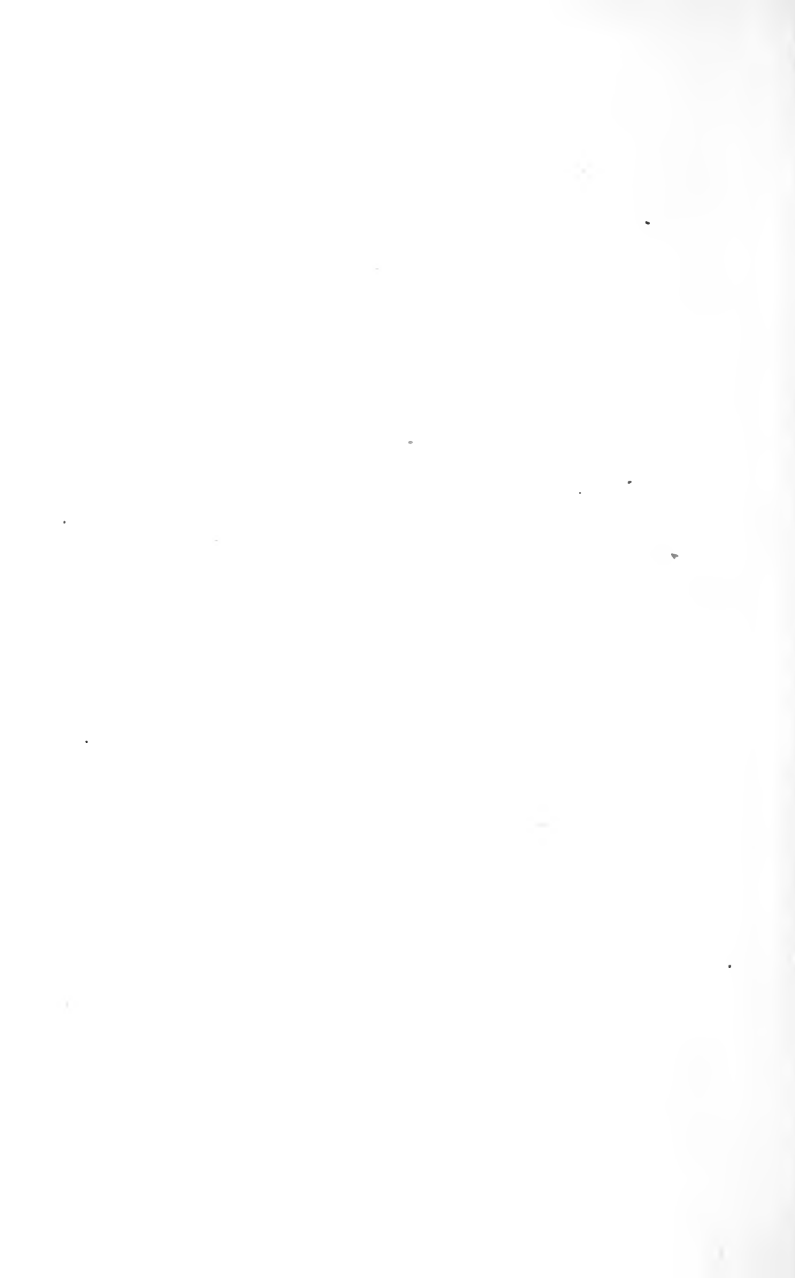
And as the voice began the two in the dark old-fashioned pew knelt down together. Again the voice :—

‘ Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife? ’

And when the voice had ceased, John Keen answered with a solemn gladness in his tone, ‘ I will,’ and Joe Bushell, kneeling in the darkened pew, whispered ‘ I will.’



'Joe took the old pledge of truth.'



Then came the question to the woman, and Ethel and Dinah answered, each from her place, 'I will.'

The murmured voices came solemnly down the aisle, and found an answer at the end of the old church.

'I take thee to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance, and thereto I plight thee my troth.'

The tears of both fell fast as they knelt in the darkened pew together, and their arms were about each other's necks. The murmured voices sounded fainter down the aisle, and found yet a fainter echo at the end.

'I take thee to my wedded husband,' and so through, with tears and tender embraces, how glad and yet regretful.

The voices sounded fuller in the aisle, and Joe took the old pledge of truth, so ill-fulfilled, and passed it upon Dinah's finger.

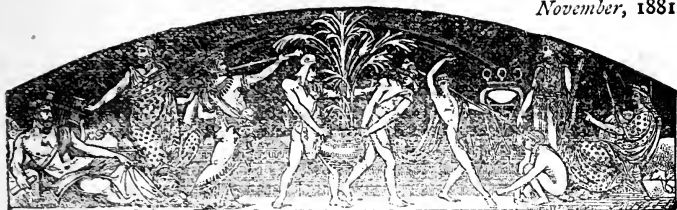
‘ With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, with all my worldly goods I thee endow.’

And so they knelt with tears, and silent kisses, and embraces, until the voices ceased, the last footstep died away, and the silence was broken only by their whispers.

‘ At last ! at last ! ’ she said, ‘ my own true husband. Mine again. Mine ! mine ! ’

‘ Yes,’ he answered from his soul. ‘ Yours, Dinah. Yours for ever ! ’

THE END.



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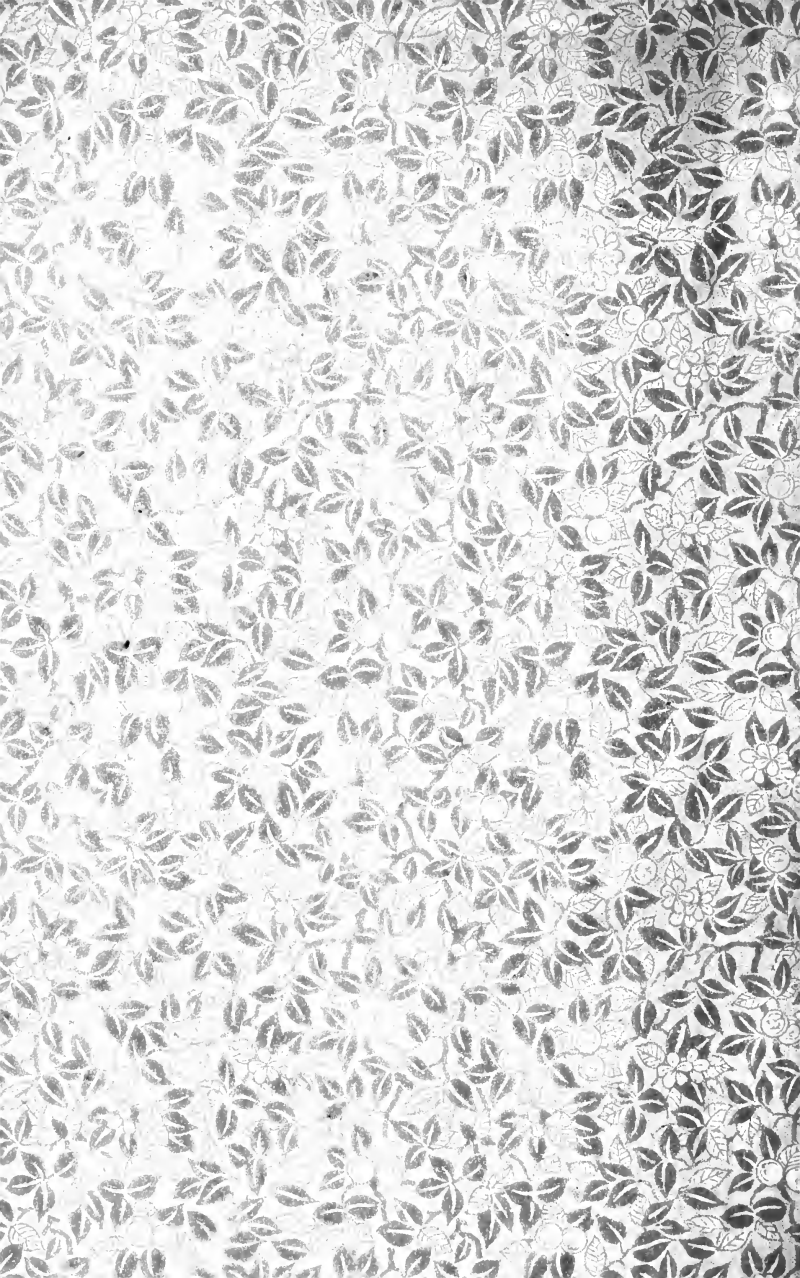
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